

## Introduction: A Dangerous Genre

Modern criticism tends to see romance as harmless and conservative, a way to fictionally explore social issues before reasserting cultural norms. Romance creates a fictional space, placed safely in the mythic past or foreign lands, in which taboos can be flirted with and social tensions played out. The genre “opens up a space for transgression or at least for renegotiating power” (Charbonneau 97). This space can be used to explore a range of issues, including “an individual’s defiance of or conformity to familial, social, cultural and political forces” (Charbonneau 96). Formulated a different way, “romance is, of course, always preoccupied with desire, whether erotic, material, political, or more rarely, spiritual” (McDonald, “Desire Out of Order and *Undo Your Door*,” 252). The types of issues addressed in romance have profoundly personal implications, often focusing on the place of the individual amidst societal forces. The protagonist of the romance “comes into conflict with one or more incompatible desires,” and most often these conflicting desires represent societal norms and deviations from the norm (253). While romance can explore a variety of issues, it does so in a characteristic manner. Competing values, whether social, political, or cultural, are not discussed but enacted, their outcomes allowed to speak to the relative merits of each. Good kings are measured against bad kings, and incestuous fathers act as unsuitable male relatives to their daughters, juxtaposed with appropriate husbands.

Although they often raise taboo issues, romances almost always resolve conflict with socially sanctioned endings. Contemporary critics have often asserted that romance is a fundamentally conservative genre, introducing disorder only to firmly reassert the social status quo. Not only do the endings affirm conventional values, but moreover the

structure of romance lends particular force to these conclusions. Middle English romances in particular foreground actions and sequence, emphasizing the proairetic code with its preference for plot over reflection and closure over digression (Putter, “Story Line and Story Shape in *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and Chrétien de Troyes’s *Conte du Graal*,” 173). This drive to the conclusion lends added force to the social mores being reasserted. The genre’s decisiveness can make the return to the status quo seem inevitable; “Romance’s reputation for conservatism is predicated not simply on its typical resolutions—which usually affirm prevailing social and sexual hierarchies—but on the way in which it works hard to make these resolutions seem like the most desirable *solutions* to the problems that the narrative has raised” (McDonald, “Desire Out of Order and *Undo Your Door*,” 253). However, romance was not always accepted as a conservative genre. Early modern and medieval critics often viewed with suspicion the taboo acts conjured by romance, questioning the value of allowing such transgressions to play out even in a fictional space.

In spite of their strongly-imposed, norm-affirming conclusions, romances in their own time suffered criticism for their depiction of taboo acts of sexuality, violence, and tyranny. The genre’s reputation slipped in the fifteenth century, a time that marked a shift to prose as verse came to be seen as lowbrow (Putter, “The Metres and Stanza Forms of Popular Romance,” 112). Meanwhile, “romance” came to mean “an extravagant fiction,” a meaning first attested in 1497, and subsequent romances began to avoid the term (112). The medieval Church called the genre “vayn carpyng,” and in the centuries to follow, detractors of romance feared that these stories would lead readers to act out the taboo acts they depicted (McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” 3). Juan Luis Vives worried that

“they kindle and styr up couetousnes, inflame angre, and all beastly and filthy desyre,” and Roger Ascham similarly cautioned, “a man by redinge [romance], shulde be led to none other ends, but only manslaughter and baudrye” (3). Reading romance is not morally or politically neutral; near-contemporary critics worried that the genre’s depictions would have a corrupting influence on audiences, causing the content of romance to spill out into real life.

However, given the norm-affirming conclusions so characteristic of the genre, such an outpouring of lust and violence would require readers or listeners to respond to the middle but not the end of romances. The question of whether romances successfully contain the taboo forces they play with goes to the heart of the morality of the genre. This problem is compounded by the fact that different audiences may not all interpret romances in the same way, and by the possibility that a romance might be altered in subsequent versions, expunging the original meanings. However, commentary about the morality of romance and the problems of interpretation is not limited to outside critics; a number of romances explore these issues. *Emaré*, *Sir Tryamour*, *Undo Your Door*, and the *Romans of Partenay* create fictional readers, writers, and texts, using their fictional spaces to explore not only social issues but also issues of the genre. For *Emaré*, the outcomes of misinterpretations are observably negative, leading these readers inevitably back to the text, where they arrive at sanctioned interpretations. This romance is the most optimistic, creating disordered readings only to assert the inevitability of sanctioned interpretations with conclusiveness characteristic of the genre. *Sir Tryamour* shares much of *Emaré*’s confidence, positing symbols as unfalsifiable signifiers, while allowing that words may be falsified to deceive listeners and force misreadings. However, *Undo Your*

*Door* reverses this model, holding words to be prophetic in their unfalsifiability while symbols may be altered. While it condemns this act as taboo and cruel, *Undo Your Door* allows for its possibility. This romance defies generic norms by concluding weakly and abruptly in a manner that does not contain the consequences of misreadings, reopening the issue of misinterpretation.

The *Romans of Partenay* treats these questions more completely. Its two nested prologues and epilogues deal explicitly with anxieties about translation, putting forward a method of translation that privileges preserving the original language above all else. The story itself takes up a more fundamental issue than the other romances, interrogating change. In *Emaré*, *Sir Tryamour*, and *Undo Your Door*, changes to the text are consistently configured as acts of violence, deceit, and betrayal. The translator's prologue to the *Romans of Partenay* expresses similar anxiety about translation as an act of violence; it lays out his methodology to the scrutiny of the reader in an effort to demonstrate that harmful change and violence to the text has been avoided. The story presents examples of this destructive change, but also depicts examples of change as a creative or transformative force. Ultimately, the text vilifies too-close scrutiny of the authorial process, privileging instead authorial discretion to change the text judiciously. While the ending may not entirely contain the text's anxieties about change, the *Romans of Partenay* upholds changes to the text as potentially neutral or positive and affirms authorial discretion.

## Chapter One: *Emaré* and Interpretive Inevitability

For *Emaré*, misinterpretations can have negative outcomes, but these outcomes motivate readers to return to the text to find the correct, normative reading. Criticism of *Emaré* and other romances has generally assumed readers may not be familiar with the romances; accordingly, I will begin with a brief summary to outline plot points and characters central to the following discussion. *Emaré* tells the story of the daughter of Emperor Artyus. The King of Sicily arrives at the emperor's court bearing a costly gift: a jeweled cloth embroidered with scenes of romance lovers made by the daughter of the Emir. After the King of Sicily departs, Artyus sends for his daughter and falls in love with her. He sends for a papal dispensation to marry her and has the cloth fashioned into a robe, which he places on Emaré before announcing his intentions. She refuses him and is cast adrift in a rudderless boat, still wearing the robe. She washes up in Galys, where the steward, Sir Kadore, finds her and cares for her. When the King of Galys sees her he decides to marry her, although his mother denounces her as a fiend. After the wedding, the king goes to France, and Emaré bears a son named Segramour in his absence. Her mother-in-law replaces the letter to the king announcing the birth with one claiming the child is a monster, then replaces the reply which said to take care of the two with an order to cast out the mother and son in a rudderless boat. This time, Emaré washes up in Rome where she and Segramour are cared for by a merchant named Jordan. Seven years later her husband and her father each separately decide to go to Rome to seek penance, but instead encounter Segramour and Emaré. The romance concludes with the family reconciled and reunited.

*Emaré* is in many ways a particularly conventional text even in a genre known for conventionality. Its basic plot occurs in more than twenty versions in various European languages (Putter, “The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*,” 157-58). Accordingly, *Emaré* has suffered from many of the same criticisms as the genre at large, such that criticizing *Emaré* is often a way of criticizing romance. As Putter protests the conventionality of *Emaré* in spite of the fact that conventionality is a hallmark of the genre, writing, “The consequent lack of distinction puts the interpreter of *Emaré* in the awkward position of having to say about the text things that might equally well be said about countless other texts” (150). Worse, he claims that this lack of specificity reflects a larger lack of merit, writing, “of the many claims for cultural distinction that critics like to make (or make up) for any text they interpret – that it is original, self-conscious, ironical, historically specific – none can be made for *Emaré*” (158). By claiming that *Emaré* lacks distinction from other romances and then claiming that there are no traditional claims of merit to be made for the romance, Putter uses his evaluation of *Emaré* to disparage romance. He also criticizes *Emaré* itself for failing to meet the more modern value of originality, something that is not an aim of romance. However, interpreting *Emaré* as adhering to a type is not an inherently lesser claim to make. On the contrary, the romance self-consciously embraces its own conventionality.

*Emaré* stands out from other romances in its exaggerated adherence to generic norms. In addition to relating a popular and well-worn plot, the romance enlarges other staples of the genre. Although the romance is only a little over 1000 lines, its opening prayer is the longest introductory prayer in Middle English romance, and the cloth receives one of the most detailed descriptions in the genre (Arthur 84, Perkins 55). In

addition, forty-two percent of the lines in *Emaré* are formulaic, making it the most formulaic of all the Middle English romances (Putter, “The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*,” 162). *Emaré* clearly is exceptional in its embrace of convention and formula. Its extreme adherence to genre norms signals the romance’s interest in representing all of romance to explore problems of the genre. Just as modern critics cite *Emaré*’s lack of merit as part of a larger criticism of its adherence to the genre of romance, *Emaré* itself comments on problems of its genre by closely reflecting romance norms.

The central problem of *Emaré*, and the area that has attracted the most criticism, is the cloth that becomes Emaré’s robe. In a relatively short romance of 1035 lines, a full 80 lines are dedicated to describing the cloth when it first appears (*Emaré* 88-168). Critical interpretations of the cloth have varied greatly, but have mostly focused on the effects the robe seems to have on characters in the text. Emaré wears the robe throughout the romance, and the robe is often mentioned within a few lines of some strong reaction from the people she encounters. Artyus, her father, gives Emaré the robe shortly before proposing to her: “And when hyt was don her upon...Then seyde the Emperour so fre, / ‘Dowghtyr, y woll wedde the’” (*Emaré* lines 244, 247-48). Sir Kadore is the next to find Emaré, still wearing the robe, but he responds by taking care of her needs: “Syr Kadore hadde gret pyté; / He toke up the lady of the see, / And hom gan her lede” (361-63). The King of Galys, Sir Kadore’s lord, sees Emaré in the robe and instantly falls in love, not unlike her own father (439). However, his mother reacts violently, “And sayde, ‘Sone, thys ys a fende, / In thys wordy wede!’” (446-47). Finally, when Emaré is discovered by a merchant named Jordan, he reacts with fear, “The cloth on her shon so bryght, / He was aferde of that syght,” yet nevertheless leads her home and provides for her (696-97). The

robe is not only closely associated with Emaré, who wears it throughout the romance, but also receives frequent mention, often within a few lines of another character's response towards Emaré. Taken together, these tendencies have suggested to many critics a causal link between the robe and characters' behavior towards Emaré. However, the wide range of responses has complicated the question of what exactly the robe does.

A few critics have suggested the robe is an extension of Emaré, emphasizing to varying degrees the garment's abilities. Writing in 1969, Mehl argued that Emaré's robe "clearly serves to set off her beauty to even greater effect" and is closely bound to Emaré as "an inseparable attribute, like her own outward beauty" (Mehl 98). He gives most emphasis to the robe's connection to Emaré, and views its narrative function as a natural one that makes Emaré more desirable. Cooper expands on this interpretation, considering the robe "a quasi-magical projection of her unchanging beauty and goodness" (Cooper 127). Reference to magic suggests that the robe takes an active role in determining events in the story, one that "serves to shift attention from Providence" (127). However, such straightforward, positive attributes should not elicit horror from the king's mother or fear from the merchant. The mixed reactions other characters have to the robe suggest its role is more complicated than signifying beauty and goodness.

Like Mehl and Cooper, Robson sees the robe as an extension of Emaré that impacts events in the plot. Robson pushes the "magical" aspect of the robe even further, claiming it functions as a love-charm to both represent and inspire sexual love (Robson 67). Oddly, she claims that Emaré implicitly desires her father and uses the robe to seduce him before refusing him (67-72). Robson's argument that Emaré is the tale's "prime mover" seems at odds with the heroine's repeated and involuntary exile by



rudderless boat, a motif that deemphasizes Emaré's agency (66). In medieval romance, trips in rudderless boats act to place the fate of the protagonist in God's hands, and "Heroic prowess, or indeed any kind of deliberate action, is largely eliminated from such stories...the victims are so often those who have least agency in a pre-modern, or in any, society" (Cooper 107-108). In the literature, disembarking in a rudderless boat is only occasionally voluntary and always involves a surrender of control over one's fate, suggesting that Providence does more than Emaré to direct events. Her survival at sea and eventual arrival in Rome are described as conforming to a divine plan, "As hyt was Goddys wyll;" and "Thorow the grace of God yn trone" (675, 680). Robson, like Mehl and Cooper, links the robe closely to Emaré in seeking to explain its role in driving the plot. These increasingly functionalistic readings focus on the robe as a mechanism driving the action of the plot yet fail to adequately explain why an object so closely bound up with Emaré's positive attributes should actively bring her into danger.

On the other side are critics who argue that the cloth has no function at all. Hopkins claims the cloth has only an obscuring role, distracting readers from narrative events (Hopkins 76). She argues that the robe lacks a narrative function; rather than being used by Emaré, the robe is used unsuccessfully by her father to coerce her into marriage (70, 76). She considers the robe to finally come to function symbolically as "an ironic emblem of Emaré's vulnerability and of the wrongs done to her," reversing the claims of agency made by Robson. Yet, in spite of noting that the lengthy ekphrastic scene takes up approximately one-tenth of the poem, Hopkins gives no attention to this passage (81). As a result, she passes over the meanings inscribed in the cloth prior to its involvement in Emaré's story. Ad Putter goes further in questioning the efficacy of the robe, denying it

both narrative and symbolic function. He claims “the robe makes things happen, not because it symbolizes something (exactly what the critics cannot agree on), but simply because making things happen is what it does” (Putter, “The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*,” 176). His insistence that narrative must have “causal connections” and that these are lacking in *Emaré* confuses the mode of causality common to romance in general and *Emaré* in particular (174-175). Auerbach notes that courtly romances are governed by “aventure,” or adventure, which often lacks rational connections, but does not render events “accidental” (Auerbach 135). Romance is not concerned with realism even in terms of presenting a rational chain of causality, so there is no need for the cloak to cover a gap in causality. Moreover, lack of agreement on the symbolism of the robe does not prove that it is meaningless. While scholarly consensus has been elusive, it generally agrees that this central image that dominates the short poem is key to interpreting the poem as a whole.

The bulk of criticism of *Emaré* has focused on trying to extrapolate a symbolic function of the robe from its narrative function, yet its role in the narrative is ambiguous. As a result, the robe’s role in the events of *Emaré*’s life has received far more attention than the description of the robe in the lengthy ekphrastic passage in which it is first introduced in the form of a cloth. Putter claims “the robe’s lack of inherent meaning” invites readers to “supply the missing causal connection,” attempting to fill narrative meaning from what he sees as a symbolic gap (Putter, “The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*,” 175). Fowler proposes an opposite approach, seeking symbolic meaning from narrative gap: “Precisely because ekphrasis represents a pause at the level of narration and cannot be read functionally, the reader is possessed by a strong need to interpret” (Fowler 27).

He proposes three approaches to the problem of set-piece description. The first stresses the role of description in setting the scene and evoking reality (26). The second integrates description and narrative, often by turning description of an object into an account of its making. The third relates description to narrative on a psychological level, either causally or by metaphoric links (27). In the case of *Emaré*, the robe invokes not a realistic context but a generic one. The robe does not correspond directly to a single symbolic meaning, as disparate scholarly readings have indicated, but rather is overloaded with meanings, generating new interpretations from the viewers within the story: these characters are possessed with as strong an urge to interpret as are the critics.

The interpretation of the robe hinges not on its role in the plot, but on the lengthy ekphrastic passage that introduces it. In this lengthy description, the images inscribed on the cloth stand out. Each corner contains the image of famous lovers; in the first, “Ydoyne and Amadas,” followed by “Trystram and Isowde so bryght,” then “In the thyrdde korne, wyth gret honour, / Was Florys and Dam Blawncheflour” (*Emaré* 122, 134, 145-146). In the fourth corner is a couple not from romance, but instead the cloth’s maker and her lover (158-59). Fowler’s first approach to ekphrasis is to stress the role of set-piece description in setting the scene and signifying reality itself. Yet, the cloth itself sets three scenes of unreality. Moreover, the cloth is a fantastic and fabulous object, such that “So ryche a jwell ys ther non / In all Crystyanté” (107-108). The cloth is both a product of romance and a visual representation of romance stories. As Scala observes, this “visual aggregate of romances” places *Emaré* into a “generic frame” (Scala 227). Scala argues that the cloth figures for the whole poem (227). Rather than signifying realism, the cloak sets a metatextual scene, signifying a genre, alluding to other famous

romance lovers, and raising genre expectations. The cloak does not signify reality, but rather fictionality.

The fourth corner also depicts a couple, although not one from a famous romance. Whereas the other corners suggest well-known stories, the fourth corner tells a new story, that of the cloth's maker and her own lover: "Of Babyllone the Sowdan sonne, / The Amerayles dowghtyr hym by" (158-159). The fourth corner becomes an account of the cloth's making, immortalizing the tale of the cloth's maker and her lover, just as a romance does. As the narrator observes, "She loved hym in hert and thowght, / As testymoyeth thys storye," the cloth merges with *Emaré* itself, each reinforcing the testimony of the other (161-162). The account of the cloth's making transitions into an account of its history as the King of Sicily recounts the series of hands it has passed through. Each transfer of the cloth becomes a part of its story and adds to its value by attesting to the greatness of its past owners and the worth they attached to the robe. The King of Sicily proudly recounts the history of the robe:

My fadyr was a nobyll man;  
Of the Sowdan he hyt wan  
Wyth maystrye and wyth myghth.  
For gret love he gaf hyt me;  
I brynge hyt the in specyalté (172-176).

This process resembles the many retellings and rewritings of a romance, suggesting that romances gain in meaning and value over time rather than suffering corruption from an ideal original. When Artyus "lette shape a robe swythe / Of that cloth of golde," this marks a more dramatic change in the form of the cloth, suggesting perhaps a translation or a more complete rewriting, yet the original meanings of the cloth remain legible (242-43). Authorship in most medieval romances is not a unitary thing; romances as well are

an account of their making. Shaped by retellings and transformed through translation, romances take on meaning rather than losing it with new iterations. They evolve almost organically, and their transformations occur outside of the control of the theoretical “original” author, whose work may be reinterpreted and rewritten freely. The cloth’s connections to other romances expands its meaning beyond the events of Emaré’s story; by encompassing other romances, it figures for the whole genre.

Fowler’s final approach is to explore the relationship of description to narrative on a metaphorical or psychological level. The interpretive problem and the ensuing critical debate surrounding the robe reflect the fact that it does not correspond one-to-one with a single symbolic meaning. At the same time as the cloth represents a romance, it also resembles other kinds of books. With its collection of romance images and precious stones, the cloth appears as a romance miscellany and a lapidary (Scala 227). The robe’s interpretive possibilities are paralleled by overloaded plot motifs in Emaré’s story. The romance includes such tropes as flight from incest, accused queen, calumniated wife, monstrous birth, rudderless boats, lovesickness, and, in a certain sense, tokens of recognition. Segramour, Emaré’s son, also seems to be overloaded with symbolism. At his birth, he is accused not only of being monstrous, but of being a monster three times over: “Thre heddes hadde he there, / A lyon, a dragon, and a beere” (538-539). Moreover, he has not only a single birthmark, but “a dowbyll kyngus marke” (504). The double mark does not serve as a recognition token to reveal Segramour’s identity, however, as he remains with his mother throughout the story. Instead, Segramour himself functions as a recognition token twice, revealing Emaré to both her father and her husband (920-924, 1004-1008). In addition, Segramour doubles for an oral version of the robe; whereas the

cloth is a visual telling of a romance, Segramour tells Emaré's story orally to her father and her husband.

The robe, like the entire romance, is overloaded with meanings, generating new interpretations from the viewers within the story. As Scala observes, "the cloth, like the girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is a highly wrought figure that signifies the complexity and interpretability of the text in which they are contained" (230).

Interpretability and the ambiguity of symbols are common features of romances, not an argument for meaninglessness. Writing about *The Knight Sets Forth*, Auerbach reflects, "In other episodes of the courtly romances it is sometimes possible to make out symbolic, mythological, or religious motifs...but it is rarely possible to define the meaning precisely, at least so long as the courtly romance remains true to type" (Auerbach 130). In representing a range of interpretive possibilities, the cloth recreates a defining feature of the genre. Symbols are neither tightly controlled by the text nor easily and comfortably interpretable. The difficulty of interpretation is the point: given tightly structured and conventional plot arcs, there is little mystery around the ending or even how the ending will be achieved, but there is considerable mystery around the symbols in the text, how they will function, and what they signify.

The cloth immediately seems to demand interpretation, not only from contemporary critics, but also from characters in the story who see it. Fowler argues, "The question of focalization, of 'who sees?', is raised with particular and obvious force by description," yet this question remains relevant throughout the story, not only in the ekphrastic passage (Fowler 29). When the cloth is first described, it is from the perspective of a narrator as well as through the perspectives, revealed through dialogue

and reactions, of Artyus and the King of Sicily. As the robe is passed on to new owners and seen by new characters, who constitute “readers,” the viewpoints multiply and so do the interpretations. The robe is as contested a symbol among the characters as it is among the critics. It at once defies and demands interpretation; when it is presented to Artyus,

The Emperour lokede therupone  
And myght hyt not se,  
For glysteryng of the ryche ston;  
Redy syght had he non,  
And sayde, “How may thys be?” (98-102).

Artyus is as dazzled as are the critics. The distinction between looking and seeing underscores the difficulty of interpretation; the emperor can perceive the cloth, yet not make sense of what he perceives. The cloth defies “redy syght,” or easy interpretation, yet Artyus feels compelled to interpret, asking, “How may thys be?” Although this question is only explicitly articulated by Artyus, it is answered throughout the poem by different characters, who offer their own interpretations of the cloth.

Throughout the romance, the cloth is described in terms of impressions; because of its close association with Emaré, these impressions are often attributed to her rather than the cloth directly. Again and again, the cloth makes of Emaré a romance heroine, emphasizing her fictionality: “And when hyt was don her upon, / She semed non erthely wommon,” or “When she was theryn ydyghth, / She semed non erthly thing” (244-245, 395-96). In each case, however, we are told what Emaré *seems* rather than what she *is*, and indeed what she seems is the more important of the two, as it affects how she is treated at the hands of each new interpreter. Ross G. Arthur rightly underscores the importance of character interpretations; he argues that “the poet directs us towards considering the cloak according to a theory of response to it as a sign” (Arthur 89).

However, he postulates that the cloak is a sign in an Augustinian sense, functioning to lead interpreters to *caritas*. Such a reading risks reducing the poem to an allegory and elides its more secular focus. The cloak represents not religious virtue, but romance, and what is at stake is not proper religious devotion, but proper interpretation of romance. As such, the various interpretations of the robe raised by Artyus and other “readers” are not arbitrary or equal. Readings of the cloth exert power over how the cloth functions, at times dangerous power, representing moral anxiety about the uses to which the romance can be turned. Typically, romances move towards strong conclusions that resolve disorder, often social disorder; in the case of *Emaré*, this social disorder represents and reflects disordered readings of romance. The interpretation of romance has implications for societal norms and, potentially, for the reader’s behavior in the real world. In spite of these high stakes, however, the author has relatively little control. His work may be adapted and changed, altering the meaning, or interpreted differently by different readers. *Emaré* focuses on readers, demonstrating the ill effects or positive outcomes of their various readings of the cloth.

The difficulty in interpreting the cloth stems from its overabundance of meanings, which shift as the cloth falls under the sway of various readers within the romance. Artyus is the first to propose a theory of the cloth: “The Emperour sayde on hygh / ‘Sertes, thys ys a fayry, / Or ellys a vanyté!’” (103-105). His immediate interpretation is that the cloth represents something supernatural, perhaps magical. In addition to containing depictions of lovers, the cloth is encrusted with a wide variety of precious stones, which were widely used as charms in the Middle Ages (Arthur 88). Artyus tries to use the cloth itself as a charm or at least a love token, yet he seems more affected by the



cloth than its intended target. After the King of Sicily leaves, Artyus sends for his daughter then for papal dispensation to marry her. He has the cloak fashioned and places it on Emaré, then immediately announces his intention to marry her (242-48). The progression of Artyus's incestuous love and the arrival, transformation, and re-gifting of the cloth alternate. The close proximity of these two chains of events suggests a link, but the lack of causal language obscures the nature of that link. However, Artyus seems to perceive the robe as having the power to seduce his daughter. When Artyus places the cloak on Emaré, it seems intended to convince her to marry him; he utters as a command, "Dowghtyr, y woll wedde the, / Thow art so fresh to beholde" (248-49). He makes no other attempt to convince her. When the cloak does not have the intended effect, he grows angry and casts her adrift in a rudderless boat. The emperor's attempt to use the robe to get Emaré to marry him, combined with his assertion that "thys ys a fayry," suggests that he believes in the efficacy of the robe as a love charm. However, the robe seems to have more effect on him than on Emaré.

The emperor's belief that the robe is a love-charm makes it so, but only for him. His interpretation of the cloth does not affect Emaré's behavior, but it does affect Artyus's own behavior. While the cloth is in sight, he behaves as though under the power of a love charm. He is immediately inspired to send for his daughter and then to fall in love with her. After he sends her away and she, and therefore the cloth, recedes from his vision, the spell is lifted. Again, the emphasis is on regarding and seeing: "Of her they lost the syght. / The Emperour hym bethowght / That he hadde all myswrowht" (279-81). His incestuous desire seems to have immediately evaporated, as he repents not only of sending away his daughter, but of his unnatural desire: "I wrowght ayeyn Goddes lay / To

her that was so trewe of fay” (295-96). The instantaneousness of this switch suggests magic, that the emperor’s interpretation of the robe has brought that meaning into being, but only for him. This interpretation is not neutral, but has implications for Artyus’s behavior, which he belatedly recognizes as contrary to God’s law and which will require repentance and penance.

A number of readings of the cloth result in morally neutral or positive outcomes; these interpretations coexist in polysemous harmony. Sir Kadore, the steward who recovers Emaré after her first sea voyage, reacts with shock that suggests a similar difficulty of interpretation: “A boot he fond by the brym, / And a glysteryng thyng theryn, / Therof they hadde ferly” (349-51). However, he then seems to shift. The robe glitters, but does not blind him to Emaré’s humanity. While he seems slow to interpret the cloth, his interpretation of Emaré’s condition is immediate and accurate: “She hadde so longe meteles be / That hym thowht gret dele to se; / She was yn poynt to dye” (355-57). Indeed, Emaré has been adrift “A good seven nyghth and more... For hungur and thurste almost madde” (326, 335). The text provides explicit confirmation of Sir Kadore’s reading, although he interprets not the central symbol, but rather the events of the narrative. In offering no interpretation of the cloth, Sir Kadore nonetheless acts with “gret pyté,” seeing after Emaré’s needs (361). The text upholds Sir Kadore’s honorableness even when his king commands him to cast Emaré and her infant to sea, an action Sir Kadore knows to be wrong. Emaré removes the moral dilemma by insisting on her own exile, “Loke thou be not shente, / But do my lordes commaundement” (628-30). By protecting the honor of Sir Kadore, the text also upholds his reading. Although he does

not actively interpret the cloth, his interpretation of events of the narrative is clear-sighted and leads him to act morally and honorably.

The King of Galys, too, comes to a reading sanctioned by the text, which unlike Sir Kadore's involves an active reading of the cloth. Like Mehl, for whom the cloth sets off Emaré's beauty and symbolizes her inner perfections, the king interprets the cloth as an outward sign of Emaré's beauty and worthy attributes (Mehl 98). The king closely associates the robe with the woman; upon seeing Emaré

In kurtull alone alone served yn hall,  
Byfore that nobull kyng...  
The kyng loked her upon,  
So fayr a lady he sygh nevr non:  
Hys herte she hadde yn wolde (392-93, 397-99).

The king of Galys looks upon Emaré and the robe as if they are a single entity. His interpretation of Emaré is contingent upon his interpretation of the robe: "When she was theryn ydyghth, / She semed non erthly thing" (395-96). The tag "non erthly thing" and its variations occur frequently in the poem, driving home the poem's preoccupation with fictionality. While swathed in the robe, Emaré becomes a romance heroine, rather than a real woman; the type of heroine she is, and whether her otherworldliness is attractive or threatening, depends on the interpretation of her viewer.

The result of the king's reading is immediate and striking, demonstrating the mysterious efficacy of the robe as it acts according to each reader's interpretation. The king plunges into lovesickness, which manifests itself as a loss of appetite: "He was so anamerred of that syghth, / Of the mete non he myghth, / But faste gan her beholde" (400-402). The text emphasizes sight and seeing, which throughout the poem stands in for "reading" the cloth, underlining his reading of the robe as the direct cause of the

lovesickness. However, unlike Emaré's father, the king is an appropriate suitor and acts on his reading responsibly. The power and immediacy with which his reading affects him nonetheless does not force the king to behave rashly. The king's reading has implications for his behavior, but does not control him. Before marrying her, he seeks the opinion of his steward, "Fyrst he called Syr Kadore, / And othur knyghtes that ther wore," asking them, "Syr, whenns ys that lovely may / That yn the halle served thys day?" (409-410, 418-19). Only when he is satisfied with the answer does he make up his mind to marry Emaré. The distinction between the king's sudden, dramatic lovesickness and measured, prudent action emphasizes the responsibility of the reader.

Like Sir Kadore, the merchant Jordan offers a functionalist reading of the cloth. He, too, is moved to offer Emaré assistance when he finds her boat washed up; like Sir Kadore, he interprets Emaré's situation, "She hath so longe meteles be, / That me thynketh grette pyté," passing a judgment that adds to the text's condemnation of Artyus and the old queen of Galys, both of whom cast out Emaré (718-19). While he responds to Emaré's plight, his reading focuses on the robe as a marker of class. For Jordan, Emaré seems "non ertyly wyght," but not in a way that inspires either love or hate (701). Instead, he responds with awe: "He was aferde of that syght, / For glysteryng of that wede" (698-99). Jordan immediately recognizes Emaré as a lady, as the impossible richness of the cloth suggests not magic or a marriage prospect, but aristocracy. When he addresses her, it is with an acknowledgement of her class: "He sayde, 'What hette ye, fayr ladye?'" (703) His reading is not only factually correct, for Emaré is the daughter of an emperor and the wife of a king, but also leads to moral behavior. Jordan offers her hospitality: "When he come to hys byggyng, / He welcomed fayr that lady yynge" (709-

710). Jordan's reading closely resembles Sir Kadore's in its more functionalist interpretation of the robe and Emaré's condition, but with an added emphasis on class. Like Sir Kadore's reading, Jordan's is sanctioned by the text as leading to appropriate and moral behavior.

Emaré's future mother-in-law, the old queen of Galys, comes to a harmful reading of the cloth. However, instead of improper love, her response is one of rejection: "The olde qwene spakke wordus unhende / And sayde, 'Sone, thys ys a fende, / In thys wordy wede!'" (445-47). The text critiques this interpretation in an understated way by calling her words "unhende," but the queen's own actions discredit her further. She tries to bend reality to fit her interpretation, altering the letters between the king and Sir Kadore. This action goes beyond discourtesy and into evil: "Of werkes she was unhende. / Another lettur she made wyth evyll, / And sayde the qwene had born a devyll" (534-36).

Changing the letters is a way of changing the text to force a different, harmful reading, bringing into being the fiend of the queen's initial interpretation. The altered letters force a reinterpretation; when Sir Kadore receives the troubling command supposedly from his king, Emaré asks him, "What may thys be?", closely mirroring her father's earlier "How may thys be?" upon seeing the cloth (615, 102). The old queen's altered letters obscure the original, creating further misinterpretations, but ultimately fail to completely expunge sanctioned interpretations.

After claiming that Emaré is a fiend, the queen bends the text to suit her interpretation by altering the letters to and from the king of Galys. The king repeats the word "fiend" to describe the infant, which he sees "Such a fowle, lothly fende / To come bytwene us too," yet this reading is not correct (563-64). The queen's changes to the text

have obscured it and come not only between the king and his wife, but also between him and a better interpretation. This alteration has implications for the king's reading, but cannot change it entirely; he still believes he has "wedded the fayrest thing / That on erthe myght go" (560-61). Another alteration is required to warp the text to fit the queen's interpretation and desires. She changes the king's response so that Emaré is not cared for, but cast out to sea again with her child. Reading the letter and unaware of the change, Emaré can only access inaccurate interpretations, concluding, "For he weddede so porely / On me, a sympull lady, / He ys ashamed sore" (631-33). However, the queen's inability, even with changes to the text, to convince the king that he has married a fiend and her powerlessness to prevent the discovery of the truth vindicates romance. In spite of the dangers of an alteration to the text and all the freedom of readers to interpret as they will, romance leads inexorably to "correct" readings.

After condemning the interpretations of some of the characters, the text works to bring their interpretations within the bounds of acceptability. The queen's machinations fail to suppress the truth; upon the king's return, he and Sir Kadore confer and discover the altered letters: "The kyng toke the lettur to rede, / And when he sawe that ylke dede, / He wax all pale and wanne" (769-71). Coming to a correct interpretation is contingent on returning to the original. In this case, the original letters have been destroyed, but the authors of the letters serve as reliable points of reference. However, the central symbol of the romance, Emaré's robe, presents a greater challenge for reinterpretation because it does not correspond neatly to a narrative meaning but rather acts as a contested symbol. For the cloth, there is no unitary author to return to, as the cloth has changed hands and meanings many times since it was made by the Emir's daughter.

Instead, readers who have misinterpreted the robe must return to the original text rather than an author. Emaré's father and husband both decide to do penance, a deliberate reinterpretation and renunciation of their past readings and the deeds that arose from them. Penance is a willful change, not of the text but of the mindset of the penitent. Although Emaré's husband has not acted sinfully towards her, nonetheless the narrative demands penance because the religious act of penance creates the impetus to return to the text and represents a decision to reinterpret. Neither penitent actually makes it to see the pope or receive absolution from him; in the end, spiritual penance and absolution prove unnecessary because the crux of the problem is the interpretation of the cloak rather than the spiritual state of the penitents. Both are stopped short by Emaré, Segramour, and the robe, which is their unwitting but true destination.

By contrast, Emaré's mother-in-law does not seek penance and reinterpret the robe. Her misreading has been more willful, involving an intentional obscuring of the text by changing the letters. However, the text does not damn her. While her son insists, "By my krowne she shall be brent, / Wythowten any othur jugement," in fact he does forebear, allowing instead that "Grete lordes toke hem betwene / That they wolde exyle the qwene / And berefe her hyr renowne. (796-97, 799-801). By contrast, "in other versions she is executed for her duplicity and dies in her sin, but in *Emaré* even she is not totally excluded from the possibility of salvation" (Arthur 91). After all of the anxiety surrounding the freedom of different readers to interpret the cloth in harmful ways, the text's leniency towards the old queen marks the force with which the text has reasserted correct readings. Ultimately, the emergence of sanctioned interpretations is inevitable enough that the queen is rendered unthreatening and allowed to live on in error.

While the King of Galys initially comes to a sanctioned reading of the robe vindicated by courteous and appropriate behavior, his mother's alterations to the text force misinterpretations from both him and Emaré. The ultimate repudiation of these misreadings is to reverse the alterations that served "To come bytwene us too," while also allowing for Emaré's misinterpretation to be corrected (564). Moreover, prior to arriving in Rome, the king has not fully returned to his original interpretation of the cloth. Initially, he reads the cloth as signifying Emaré's inward and outward perfection, making her the ideal wife, insisting, "I wyll have that fayr may / And wedde her to my quene" (431-32). Although discovering the truth of the letters reveals that his son was not born a fiend, the king ceases to consider his marriage to Emaré as inevitable. He assumes that Emaré "Was drowned for hys sake," when in fact she must return to him to satisfy the generic conventions of romance as inscribed on the cloth (819). He decides "I woll to the Pope of Rome, / My penans for to take!", but in fact he never reaches the pope because the correction he needs is not spiritual, but rather textual (821-22). He encounters the text again, but initially in a different form, one embodied by Segramour as an oral teller rather than the cloth as a textual teller.

The text emphasizes the king's slowness to arrive at the correct interpretation, ironically teasing out the moment of recognition. The king initially engages with Segramour like he does the cloth, through looking and beholding: "Then sayde all that looked hym upon, / So curteys a chylde sawe they nevur non" (871-72). He approaches the true interpretation, first noticing the boy's courtesy, which hints at his noble lineage. He also experiences unexpected paternal feelings without yet realizing that Segramour is his son. He addresses the boy as "Swete sone," which the MED glosses as meaning not only



one's offspring, but also a term of address to a young man (875). The king of Galys also views Sagramour paternally as he "loked on the chylde so fre, / And mykell he lovede hym thoo" (884-85). The irony of the near-miss recognition draws attention to the king's initial failure to interpret correctly. In addition, these lines connect Sagramour to the robe as a sign that is looked at and interpreted, insisting on the actions of looking and beholding.

Nevertheless, Sagramour cannot be fully interpreted by a viewer; instead, he functions as an oral teller of a romance. Putter asserts that *Emaré* was written no later than 1460 and has a textual source but oral circulation (Putter, "The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*," 157). The romance represents both possibilities, insisting on a physical text with the robe as well as an oral story with Sagramour and frequent appeals to images of traveling minstrels and other oral tellers, as at the beginning: "Menstrelles that walken fer and wyde" (13). Even the metrical form is ambiguous. Tail rhyme has its origins in song, likely developed either from a liturgical sequence or from the septenary, which stems from Latin song found in England by the twelfth century (Ad Putter, "The Metres and Stanza Forms of Popular Romance," 121). However, tail rhyme also has an association with later medieval romance, when it came into style for written texts at least one version removed from a French source text (Scala 226). Ultimately, the oral and textual possibilities are as difficult to disentangle in *Emaré* as they are in the genre at large, and coexist rather than operating as a binary.

Sagramour tells the same story as the robe, but orally. Neither his double kings-mark nor his looks give away his true lineage to the king. Instead, he announces their relation, "Take me your honde and go wyth me, / For y am of yowr kynne! / Ye shull

come speke wyth Emaré” (920-22). The verb has shifted from looking or beholding to speaking, signifying the change in emphasis to the oral aspect of the romance. The insistence on Segramour’s spoken words is repeated when he meets his grandfather, Artyus, telling him, “My worde that thou wyll here: / Ye shull come speke wyth Emaré” (1005-1006). Nonetheless, the king and Artyus both still doubt. Emaré’s husband insists, ““That may never bene!’ / Nevurtheles wyth hym he wente” (930-31). Even after he is told of Emaré’s survival, Artyus still remains stuck in his belief that she has died, which he projects onto Segramour, “Sone, why umbraydest me of bale, / And thou may se no bote?” (1010-11). Ultimately, the oral and textual aspects of the story come together to reveal the necessary and inevitable ending of family and reunion. The moment of recognition begins with Segramour’s oral telling, but does not reach conclusion until his words are confirmed by the sight of Emaré in the robe, when “Ayeyn hem come the lady gent, / In the robe bryght and shene” (932-33). In addition to serving as a token of recognition and doubling for the robe, Segramour also presents an alternative to the fabricated letters. He is another version of the original, but not a harmful one; his oral version cooperates with the textual version to bring about recognition and understanding.

Although *Emaré* raises concerns about the purposes towards which romance can be turned, it firmly resolves them by reasserting correct interpretations in a strongly-imposed conclusion. Romance often acts as a fictional space in which to explore the implications of taboo behavior. In *Emaré*, the implications of reading romance take precedence over the incest and false accusation motifs. The robe unifies the poem and ties it thematically to other romances, raising the generic context for the poem and involving the genre of romance at large in its discussion. The cloth, as a text, is ultimately

subject to the interpretations of various viewers in the romance, who act as readers. *Emaré* places the onus on readers, indicating that reading is not morally neutral by demonstrating the damaging results of improper interpretations. However, *Emaré* ultimately shows that romance is not necessarily corrupting. Even when Emaré's mother-in-law symbolically alters the text by changing letters to and from the king, the original meaning is not obliterated from the text. Rather, characters who have misinterpreted the text move inexorably towards a sanctioned reading, returning to reread the text in a process coded as spiritual penance. *Emaré* explores the dangerous freedom of readers to misinterpret, but ultimately contains these anxieties, irresistibly pulling characters towards sanctioned readings.

## Chapter Two: *Sir Tryamour*, *Undo Your Door*, and Falsified Meanings

A number of other romances deal with questions of contested interpretation within the broader genre of romance. Resolving contested interpretation is of particular importance for romance, as the genre frequently deals with disorder and taboo. *Emaré* suggests that arriving at the correct interpretation is inevitable, a stance largely supported by the genre's strong emphasis on reestablishing order with a heavily-imposed conclusion. However, other romances draw out the possibilities of misinterpretation and contest the proper way to interpret romance, a process that seems intuitive in *Emaré*. *Sir Tryamour* stretches out a reinterpretation scene like the delayed recognition scene concluding *Emaré*. It concedes that language may be falsified while maintaining the consistency of symbols, positing that correct interpretation hinges on following the romance to its conclusion and interpreting unfalsifiable symbols. However, *Undo Your Door* turns this model on its head, holding words inviolable while violently disfiguring symbols to force a misreading. This romance's contesting model reopens the question of how to arrive at correct readings, and moreover, its conclusion does not contain the consequences of the misreading.

*Sir Tryamour*, like *Emaré*, explores non-recognition as a means of discussing interpretation. *Sir Tryamour* concerns Margaret, the calumniated wife of King Arthus of Aragon, and her son, Tryamour. Because they are unable to have a child, Arthus vows to go to the Holy Land, but the night before he leaves, Margaret conceives a child. King Arthus departs, unaware of the pregnancy, and in his absence his treacherous steward, Sir Marrok, attempts to seduce Margaret. She rebuffs him, but he claims that he was merely testing her. Upon the return of King Arthus, Sir Marrok claims to have caught Margaret

committing adultery with a knight, who impregnated her. The enraged king exiles the pregnant queen with an elderly knight, Sir Roger, to see her to the borders of the land. Sir Marrok, intent on raping Margaret, gathers a company of men and pursues the two; Sir Roger and his hound fight them off, giving Margaret time to hide, but Sir Roger dies in the confrontation. The hound buries Sir Roger and mourns him for seven years, before returning to the court to kill Sir Marrok and lead the lords and ladies of the court to the grave of his master. Meanwhile, Margaret gives birth to Tryamour in the wilderness, and the romance picks up with his adventures, including his marriage to Helen, heiress of Hungary, and his discovery of his lineage. The entire romance deals extensively with non-recognition; both Arthus and Helen, Tryamour's beloved, repeatedly fail to recognize Sir Tryamour or succeed in recognizing him only partially (Archibald 68-69). Non-recognition is drawn out even longer than in *Emaré*, with Arthus failing several times to recognize his son. As in *Emaré*, near-miss recognition and non-recognition signal failure to correctly interpret. However, I wish to focus on the first half of the romance, concerning Margaret and the events in Aragon.

The problems of the first half of the romance revolve around the lies and deceit of the steward, Sir Marrok. Although he kills Sir Roger, the steward never manages to directly effect any bodily harm against either Margaret or King Arthus. The steward does great damage, but mostly with untruths. He first violates his oath to his king by attempting to seduce Margaret after the king "comawndyd Marrok, on hys lyfe, / That he schulde kepe wele the quene hys wyfe" (*Sir Tryamour* 55-56). When she rebuffs him, the steward protects himself with another lie, that he only tested her, "For Y wolde wytt yowre wyll / Whethur that hyt were gode or ylle / And for no nothyr thyng" (112). The

excuse works; “The lady wende hyt had byn soo,” and so remains unaware of her danger when her husband returns (122). The steward tells a different lie to the king, that “Another knyght, so mote Y spede, / Gat the chylde syth thou yede / And hath the quene forlayne!” (172-74). Both the king and queen unquestioningly believe the steward, allowing his words to dictate their perceptions of events. The text condemns Arthus for his easy belief in Sir Marrok, which satisfies him without even discussion with his wife: “Nor no worde he wolde speke hur wyth, / And that was grete synne” (233-34). In this case words are doubly deceptive, with both the lies of Sir Marrok and the absence of words between the king and queen contributing to misinterpretation. The steward’s treachery reveals the easy falsifiability of words, and the text’s rebuke of King Arthus’s belief points to the necessity of verifying those words with outside evidence. However, the romance resolves the misreading created by the king’s credulity not by introducing a competing testimony, but by revealing the truth through unfalsifiable symbols.

Less concise and compact than *Emaré*, *Sir Tryamour* lacks the single unifying symbol of the robe. However, Sir Roger’s hound functions similarly on a smaller scale, prompting reinterpretation and bringing the first half of the romance to a conclusion. The dog suggests the genre of romance by its name, Trewelove, referencing the drive that brings together couples in sanctioned matches. Although not referenced earlier, Trewelove appears in the narrative when Sir Roger is under attack, “Trewe-love, hys hownde so gode, / Halpe hys maystyr and be hym stode” (313-14). The hound’s name and its loyalty to Sir Roger suggest the value of faithfulness, which is endemic to romance. It brings lovers together again after being separated by dangers and punishes faithless stewards and kings who wrongfully repudiate their wives. Faithfulness,

alongside the “true” love of lovers destined to be together, is closely connected to the strong drive to conclusion characteristic of romance; family and romantic bonds are buttressed by the generic norm of upholding the values of the status quo.

Trevelove acts explicitly to pull the romance, or at least this part of it, towards conclusion. He appears at the moment of the lady’s greatest peril, as if summoned by her need and Sir Roger’s: “Hys hounde halpe hym at nede” (324). The hound acts not as a dog, but as a force of romance. Trevelove plays a somewhat atypical role for a dog; often, hounds have negative connotations in romance (Eckert 583). The dogs of Chaucer’s Prioress suggest her wasteful frivolity. Dogs also have a strong association with the scriptural image of the dog returning to its vomit from Proverbs 26:11. In *Havelok the Dane* dogs are associated with thieves and outlaws, and in *Bevis of Hampton* “dog” is used as an insult (Eckert 583). Instead, Trevelove embodies romance virtues, alluding to love with its name and behaving with the kind of faithfulness that drives romances to their conclusions. While the action of the plot is initiated by a separation, Trevelove resists separation, remaining by his dead master, “Hys gode hownde, for weyle nor woo, / Wolde not fro hys maystyr goo / But lay lykyng hys woundys” (382-384). The dog faithfully remains “Seven yere, so God me save, / Kepynd he hys maystys grave / Tyll that he wexyd olde” then, without explanation, “The hounde, as the story says, / Ranne to the kyngys palays / Wythowt any more delay” (475-77). Nothing in the plot has triggered the dog’s decision to leave suddenly after years of tending the grave. Trevelove acts according to the chronology of romance, serving faithfully until a symbolic amount of time has passed, then acting to bring other characters to recognition and the romance a step closer to resolution.

The dog's return to the court leads to a scene pantomiming the reader's act of interpretation. As the hound runs into the hall, it sets off a crisis of interpretation, giving rise to a number of questions that slowly force the king and the court to reinterpret the words of Sir Marrok:

The kynge wondurth in hys wede  
Fro when he come and whedur he yede,  
And who hym thedur broght  
He thocht that he had sene hym thare  
But he wyste not when nor whare,  
Forthy then seyde he noght;  
But faste bethenkyth he hym then,  
For he thocht he schulde hym kenne —  
So syttyth he in a thocht (499-501).

The king's process of reinterpretation is protracted, revealing the thought process of someone reading a symbol. He interrogates the dog's motion, which suggests to him the ideas of both coming from and going to. In this case, they are the same; the dog runs from Sir Roger's grave, and eventually returns there. This symmetry is a common feature of romance, which typically ends as it begins, "with a final reiteration of cultural norms" (Charbonneau 97). Trewelove's symmetrical journey acts as a romance in miniature, one that the king must follow to its conclusion before correctly interpreting. The hound also suggests something familiar, something the reader has seen before. Given the familiar tropes and conventional structures of romance, interpretation involves a process of recognizing what has been seen before. However, the reader, like King Arthus, cannot gather the meaning instantaneously, nor is interpretation a simple act of recognition. Instead, King Arthus must follow the course set by Trewelove and reinterpret past events before arriving at a conclusion.



The king must actively engage with and follow Trewelove in the process of interpretation. He recognizes the hound at last, but recognition is not enough. The king's realization, "Me thynkyth that was Syr Roger hounde," is a starting point in the process of interpretation, leading to new questions: "The kyng seyde, 'What may thys mene?'" (515, 520). However, King Ardu's first attempt at reinterpretation is wrong: "Y trowe Syr Roger and the quene / Be comen to thys londe" (521-22). Interpretation requires following the romance to its end point before the correct reading can be reached, in part because the king does not initially know where the hound will lead. King Ardu imagines he will find a living Roger, returning with the exiled queen: "When he goth, pursewe hym then, / For evyrmore he wyll renne / Tyll he come there hys maystyr ys" (525-27). Instead, the hound leads first to Sir Marrok, the treacherous steward, where it performs in reverse the steward's ambush of his master for the interpretation of the court, "He starte up verament, / The steward be the throte he hente: / The hownd wrekyd hys maystyr's dethe" (535-37). The understanding of the hound's viewers increases; now, in addition to recognizing the dog, they recognize the steward, such that "There was fewe that rewyd theron / And fewe for hym wepyth" (539-40). Trewelove's reenactment of the romance continues as he leads the party to Sir Roger's grave, another sign for the court to interpret. Trewelove's behavior changes when he reaches the site, "Reste wolde he nevyr have / Tyll he come to hys maystyr's grave / And then turned he agayne," evoking his previous encounter against a similarly large party, when he defended his master, then living, from Sir Marrok and his band of men (547). The hound's reenactment complete, the courtiers return to the king to present, in effect, the completed romance.

The court's interpretation hinges heavily on symbols. Having interpreted Trewelove, they return with the corpse of Sir Roger to act as a sign to the king: "They toke hym up and leved hym noght, / The corse before the kyng was broght, / That made hys herte sory, as men sayde" (568-71). The court, in effect, behaves as Trewelove does. Although Sir Marrok is dead and there is no one to contradict them, they do not simply report on the events they have witnessed, but tell the story they have learned through a sign for the king to interpret. King Arduis is the one to finally voice the correct interpretation, decrying Sir Marrok's treachery, "For he hath slayn an awnturs knyght / And flemyd my quene wythowten ryght / For false tales that he hath me telde" (574-76). The king's reading hinges on two things: following the romance, in the form of the hound Trewelove, to its conclusion before finding the correct reading; and the interpretation of symbols. Symbols are so vital to this episode that the king, having reinterred Sir Roger, creates a new symbol for all to read, ordering the body of Sir Marrok be dragged through the streets "And hanged hym on the galowe tree / That al men myght hyt see, / That he had done treson" (580-83). The episode of Trewelove's return to court creates a scene pantomiming the act of reading, drawing out the king's confusion and misreadings. The king's court physically follows the hound on its course, interpreting events as they arise and reading viscerally immediate symbols. They tell the story to the king in the same way, returning not with an account, but with a decaying corpse to act as a sign to the king. Where the untruthful words of the steward had misled, symbols are unfalsifiable signifiers. This episode demonstrates in an exaggerated fashion the process for reading romances, which relies on a complete view of the whole romance and the interpretation of symbols.

*Emaré* and *Sir Tryamour* critique romance through the process of reading. For *Emaré*, romance raises problems of potentially dangerously immoral interpretations, but correct, sanctioned readings ultimately prevail. Readers who misinterpret the text in *Emaré* arrive at negative outcomes and revisit the text in a process configured as a trip to Rome to receive penance from the pope. However, neither Artyus nor the King of Galys reach the pope; instead, they encounter oral and written versions of the text in the form of Segramour and the robe, allowing them to arrive at sanctioned interpretations. *Sir Tryamour* focuses on the reinterpretation process in greater depth than does *Emaré*, which highlights initial misinterpretations. *Sir Tryamour* begins with a similar calumniated wife plot; as in *Emaré*, a character willfully misleads the king, driving a misinterpretation of events. The hound Trewelove leads the king and his court through the process of reinterpretation. When the dog first arrives, it prompts questions of interpretation, then draws the court through a rough reenactment of events in reverse, ambushing the treacherous Sir Marrok and guarding the already dead Sir Roger. This time, the court focuses on interpreting symbols rather than relying on the words of the steward. The fresh corpse of Sir Marrok and the old corpse of Sir Roger serve as concrete signifiers that ultimately lead the king to a correct interpretation that recognizes the innocence of his wife. For both *Emaré* and *Sir Tryamour*, initial misreadings are corrected through the inevitable force of the romance, which leads inexorably to sanctioned, correct readings.

Other romances approach questions of interpretation from the vantage point of authorship. *Undo Your Door*, also called *The Squire of Low Degree*, is a noted example of a romance interested in authorship and narration. This romance comes at the tail end of

the period, first published in 1520, and is sometimes regarded as a relic of an outmoded genre (McDonald, “Desire Out of Order and *Undo Your Door*,” 247). However, its late date of composition affords the romance an overtly self-conscious perspective and well-worn conventions with which to work. *Undo Your Door* burlesques familiar tropes of the genre, engaging with many of the questions explored by *Emaré* and *Sir Tryamour* in a more irreverent and explicit mode.

This romance concerns the princess of Hungary. She overhears a squire mourning his love for her, which is unrealizable because of his low status. She returns his love, but instructs him to go on crusade and perform various feats of arms, a venture she promises to fund. The king’s steward overhears the exchange and reveals the squire’s love to the king, who approves the match but allows the steward to guard the princess’s chamber, telling him to intervene only if the squire attempts to enter. The squire sets off, then returns for a final farewell, when he is beset by the steward and his men. The squire kills the steward but is captured by his men, who dress the body of the steward in the squire’s cloths and disfigure his face. When the princess opens the door, she believes the body to be that of the squire. She takes it into her chamber, embalms it, and kisses and caresses it daily for seven years. Meanwhile, the squire has been sent to perform his feats of arms. Upon his return, the king listens beneath the princess’s window as she laments her dead lover. He offers her a king to marry, but she rejects the proposal. The king finally explains that the body is that of the steward and relates the events that have befallen. The squire and princess marry, and the king makes the squire another king. The squire, now a king, and the princess live out their lives happily.

Like *Emaré*, *Undo Your Door* draws attention to audiences within the romance. The mode of the latter romance is more oral, with an emphasis on conversations overheard. As Spearing observes, “the Squire stands at the lowest level of the poem’s hierarchy of listeners and tellers. He overhears no one, but is overheard by the Princess” (Spearing 180). Indeed, this romance reverses the power dynamic in *Emaré*, which privileges viewers, whose interpretations have the power to affect the working of the cloth. In *Undo Your Door*, characters compete to act as authors. The squire, princess, steward, and king all present differing versions of what the romance’s future course will be. Spearing calls this a conflict “not between characters but between stories,” yet the distinction between characters and narratives is not so distinct (186). The characters are bound to their stories as author-narrators, each vying to put forward their version.

*Undo Your Door* connects itself to its genre with reference to other romances, just as *Emaré* does with depictions of other romance protagonists on the cloth. In *Undo Your Door*, these references are oral, and act as explicit models for the various narratives put forward by characters within the romance. The squire imagines his case impossible, as he does not conform to the type of traditional romance protagonists:

Wolde God that I were a kynges sonne,  
That ladyes love that I myght wonne!  
Or els so bolde in eche fyght  
As was Syr Lybius that gentell knyght,  
Or els so bolde in chyvalry  
As Syr Gawayne, or Syr Guy (75-81).

The squire sets himself within a generic context, connecting his own story to those of famous romance protagonists. He imagines romance stories about highborn protagonists, but the princess proposes a different sort of romance plot. She warns first of the treacherous steward motif, “Beware of the stewarde, I you praye, / He wyll deceyve you

and he maye” (161-62). Her reference to this topos, which manifests itself also in *Sir Tryamour*, draws attention to the fictionality and conventionality of romance while also charting her own story through familiar themes. She instructs him to perform a series of tasks, “With chyvalry ye must begynne, / And other dedes of armes to done,” continuing through various feats of endurance, dedication, and courage, “Than must ye lodge under a tre, / Among the beastes wyld and tame” (172-73, 180-82, 183). Her narrative carries the force of command, asserting control over the story by directing the actions of the squire.

The king and the steward also contest over the narrative, asserting differing versions of the story. The steward, following the narrative set forth by the princess, betrays the lovers to the king and asserts a hypothetical direction for the story: “Had I not come in, verayly,

The squyer had layne her by” (350-51). The king, however, subverts the treacherous steward topos with a blunt rejection of the story told him by his steward, “The kyng sayd to the steward tho: / ‘I may not beleve it should be so’” (355-56). The king’s denial also functions on a metatextual level, pointing out the stylistic conventionality of romance and gently ridiculing the genre as unbelievable. However, he still works within conventions, albeit a broader set of possibilities. The king asserts that the squire’s suit is attainable not because of the particulars of his situation, but because of other precedents, “For I have sene that many a page / Have become men by mariage” (373-74). He further takes control of the narrative by proposing a course of events worded as a threat, “For yf it may be founde in thee / That thou them fame for envyté, / Thou shalt be taken as a felon” (391-93). While the king’s and steward’s narratives initially seem at odds, however, they ultimately coexist within the same romance.

Ironically, the broad strokes of each proposed direction for the romance play themselves out, even when they are intended as untruths or figures of speech. The steward jealously defends his narrative, “That I have sayd, that I wyll stand therby; / To suffre death and endlesse wo, / Syr kynge, I wyl never go therfro” (404-406). The steward’s vow to die rather than deviate from his defense of his narrative, while meant rhetorically, ironically and unintentionally creates a new hypothetical course for the romance. His words seem to bring their substance into being, not only foreshadowing but also predetermining his death should the steward not yield to the king’s narrative. The steward’s prediction that the squire would seek admission to the princess’s chamber also bears out. When the squire returns to bid the princess farewell, he “thought on no mystruste,” yet he begs entry with what he must believe is an untruth, “Anone he sayde: ‘Your dore undo! / Undo,’ he sayde, ‘nowe, fayre lady! I am beset with many a spy’” (521, 534-36). Like the steward, the squire also unwittingly predicts the course of the romance, for “Ryght as they talked thus in fere, / Theyr enemyes approched nere and nere” (637-38). The squire and steward both seem unable to lie; the steward’s prediction that the squire would have sought entry to the princess’s chamber, while initially unfounded and intended to prejudice the king, later occurs. At the same time, the squire’s claim that he is beset with enemies, while stated with no knowledge that he has been betrayed and is being watched, turns out to be true. Even the steward’s rhetorical vow that he will defend his viewpoint to the death ironically comes to pass.

The outcomes of each character’s narrative also come true in the romance. The squire’s eventual marriage to the princess fulfills the narratives proposed by the king, the princess, as well as the squire. In the meantime, the squire enacts deeds of arms abroad,

behaving “Right as the kinges doughter bad him don” (896). Even the squire’s narrative is fulfilled as he returns a king’s son by engagement to the princess rather than birth, receiving the king’s greeting, “Welcome, my sonne so dere!” (910). The king also fulfills his own prediction that a page may gain status with marriage, for after the wedding, he grants the squire kingship: “He made him kyng among them al” (1120). While all of these characters’ narratives come to pass, only the king enacts his voluntarily. The squire leaves on his quest ignominiously, released from prison by the king, while the princess meets with her lover only after seven years of intimacy with the wrong corpse. For the most part, their narratives come to pass not because of any intentional action taken by the characters, but because the narratives themselves bring their stories into being. In *Undo Your Door*, words seem unfalsifiable, not because characters do not try to lie, but because words inevitably bring into existence their substance.

In marked contrast to the words spoken in *Undo Your Door*, which are always true, its symbols are subject to change and confusion. This romance, like *Sir Tryamour*, presents a dead body as a sign to be interpreted, but this interpretation goes terribly awry. In *Undo Your Door*, symbols can be falsified, but only by the commission of a terrible taboo. The king’s men alter the body of the steward by committing a taboo. In addition to dressing the corpse of the steward in the squire’s clothing, “with their swordes his face they share / That she should not know what he ware” (655-56). The disfiguring of the corpse constitutes a willful alteration of symbols designed to force a misinterpretation, an act comparable to the changed letters in *Emaré* and the slander of Sir Marrok in *Sir Tryamour*. The text configures this act as a taboo and an act of needless cruelty, drawing from the princess a heart-rending “Alas! Father, why dyd ye so?” that goes without a



satisfactory answer (987). Nonetheless, the falsification is possible and the consequences terrible; the squire inadvertently sends his dead rival into his lover's chamber and the princess passes seven years believing her lover is dead and venerating the wrong corpse. While this romance too arrives at a recognition scene wherein the princess learns her lover lives, this reinterpretation cannot undo the damage done. In a romance characterized by irony and burlesque, the princess' repeated lament is startlingly sincere: "'Alas,' she sayd, 'I have great wrong / That I have kept him here so long. / Alas, father, why dyd ye so?'" (1041). Her anguish captures the terrible act of violence and violation constituted by the alteration to the symbol of the steward's body. At the same time, it expresses the insufficiency of the ending to contain the consequences of that alteration.

The inviolate words and mutable symbols of *Undo Your Door* invert the model from *Sir Tryamour* of treacherous words and reliable symbols. Both romances deviate from *Emaré*, in which correct interpretation is inevitable regardless of alterations. While all of these romances deal with issues of contested interpretations within their stories, between them they contest the issue of how to correctly interpret romance and whether it matters. *Undo Your Door* reopens the anxieties of *Emaré* and *Sir Tryamour* and leaves them open by arriving at an abrupt, artificial ending that fails to contain taboo desires (McDonald 273). However, all three romances construe alteration as negative, a deviation from a "correct" original that forces harmful misinterpretation. The violence and taboo associated with alterations to the text in these three romances do not account for the change that is a natural part of the genre, a byproduct of translation, adaptation, and rewriting romances. *The Romans of Partenay* takes up some of the same concerns about truth, genre, and authorship, but steps back the problem of changes to the text.



### Chapter Three: *The Romans of Partenay* and Authorial Control

*The Romans of Partenay* has received very little critical attention, in part because of its length, but also because of the difficult language translated closely from the French. However, this romance offers an in-depth look at the interpretive problems of the genre. The translator's prologue and conclusion discuss his ideals and anxieties about translation, a theme that runs through the romance more broadly to explore authorship at large. *Partenay*, like most medieval romances, is not the product of a single author, but rather a work shaped through a collective authorial process involving a chain of re-writing, adapting, and translating. To the extent that *Partenay* can be said to have an author, this author is the composite of all of these individuals. While *Emaré* is centered on an image of the text, *Partenay* is held together by an image of an author, Melusine, mythical progenitor of the Lusignen line. The story begins when Amerie, earl of Poitiers, adopts Raymound, a younger son of the earl's poor relative. While the two are hunting, Amerie dies and Raymound encounters three mysterious women by a well. One of them, Melusine, tells him that she will marry him and confer wealth and status on him if he follows her instructions; however, he must vow to never seek after her on Saturdays or he will lose everything. He agrees and, following her instructions, acquires land from Amerie's heir. Melusine magically expands the land and builds a castle, then marries Raymound. The couple has a number of sons who go on to have adventures and marry heiresses.

One Saturday, Raymound's brother urges him to find out where his wife goes on Saturdays, suggesting she may be unfaithful. Raymound, humiliated, agrees to spy on his wife. He sees her bathing, and sees that she is a serpent from the waist down. Horrified

and distraught, he decides to say nothing of what he has seen. Although Melusine knows he has spied on her, she says nothing because Raymound is protecting her secret. One day, the couple's son Fromont decides to become a monk. Another of the sons, Gaffrey, becomes enraged; he traps Fromont and the other monks in their abbey and burns it down, killing all inside. Raymound finds out and calls Melusine a serpent in front of the barons and knights, blaming her supernatural nature for the behavior of their sons. Melusine turns into a serpent and flies away. Meanwhile, Gaffrey discovers a cave containing the graves of Melusine's parents with an inscription telling their story.

The tablet in the cave tells of how King Helmas, the father of Melusine, spied on his wife during childbirth, thereby breaking the terms of a curse and separating the couple. In vengeance, Melusine and her sisters Melior and Palatine imprisoned him in a cave. Their mother retaliated by laying a curse on each. Melusine was to become a serpent on Saturdays, Melior to grant a wish to anyone who could watch a sparrow-hawk for three days and nights, and Palatine was to guard the treasure of her father. Meanwhile, Raymound, repentant, goes on pilgrimage to Rome and Gaffrey rebuilds the abbey he burned down. The romance then tells the stories of Melusine's sisters, concluding when Gaffrey decides to seek the treasure guarded by Melior, only to die before he can do so. The plot contains a number of digressions and inter-related stories, but they are organized around Melusine, both in terms of her familial relationships to all of the other main characters and thematically, as Melusine embodies authorial change.

At the center of *The Romans of Partenay* is a concern with transformations, both those that occur within the text and the metatextual. Translation is configured as a kind of transformation, in which the material of one text is put "In-to other fourme," just as the

literal transformations that occur within the story concern a change of physical form (Prologue 165). The act of translation seems a source of ambivalence for the English translator, who remarks, “For frenshe rimed or metred alway / Ful oft is straunge in englishe to display” (Prologue 13-14).

According to the MED, the word “straunge” literally means “recondite, obscure” when referring to language, but also denotes things that are “foreign,” “barbarian,” or just “extraordinary.” The word “straunge,” then, literally expresses the awkwardness of translated language while also referring to things that are beyond the bounds of the known in a possibly frightening way. However, in spite of this ambivalence, the translator also works in the prologue and epilogue to justify his “straunge” creation.

The first prologue, written by the unnamed translator, deals extensively with the practice of translation and is unusual both for its topic and for the ideal of translation it espouses. Hosington comments that *Partenay* is one of the few English romances to contain “any extended and meaningful comment” on the act of translation (Hosington 408). The translator emphasizes a concern with preserving the original meaning as well as form and even syntax as much as possible while translating into English, promising to translate “Cereatly,” that is correctly, and as closely as meter will allow: “As nighe as metre will conclude sentence, / Folew I wil here my president” (18, 15-16). However, the degree of closeness is unusual in the extreme; in the translator’s epilogue, he underscores his commitment to line-by-line translation, “Cereatly by rew in it haue I go,” and even offers a justification for altering word order in the original: “The wourdes meue, and sett here & ther so, / like As of latin ho-so will fourge uers; / Wourdes most he change sondry & diuerse” (6554, 6557-59). The type of translation articulated in the prologue and

epilogue is a shockingly close one, making only apologetic allowances for meter and even grammatical syntax in the pursuit of a demanding exactness. Hosington notes that by the fourteenth century, translators felt a greater responsibility of exactness as romance began to be seen as more historical, and indeed the text does refer to itself or its source text as a history several times (Hosington 418, *Partenay* prologue 170, text 133, 1144, 5093, 5373, 5962, 5970, 6009, 6296, 6298). Nonetheless, the translator of *Partenay* goes unusually far, resulting in a text that is “idiosyncratic” and marked by words directly borrowed from the French, confusing word order, and grammatical irregularity (Hosington 416-418). Moreover, the material in addition to the form is reproduced with a degree of faithfulness unusual to English translations of French romances. English versions are often shorter, with cuts to dialogue and battle scenes and omissions or changes to descriptions of female characters, yet in *Partenay* the episodes are reproduced in order and the descriptions and dialogue match the source text (Hosington 412).

This level of precision and the lengths to which the translator goes to expound upon his method reveal defensiveness about the process of translation, the translator’s assurances about his own work notwithstanding. Any translator, we are told, “most torn and wend, metrely to close,” an act of violence only justified by the ultimate creation of something new and whole, once the wounds in the text have been closed (6569). This vision of translation is one that graphically rips into the text, potentially becoming violating and violent in its treatment of the source material. Rather than a benign metamorphosis, this violent transformation has the potential to leave a text mutilated and monstrous. However, the act of translation need not be read as necessarily deforming; the translator of *Partenay* claims that his cautious and conservative work succeeds in

“Preseruing, I trust, mater and sentence / Vnwemmed, vnhurt, for any excesse, / Or by menusing don by violence” (6568-70). This concern about the translator’s responsibility towards the text pulls against a conflicting concern with the “straunge” quality of translated language, and ultimately outweighs it, resulting in the stilted English and meticulously close translation of the translator’s work.

While the translator’s prologue and epilogue frame the text with a discussion of translation and transformation, treatment of the theme is not limited to the portion written by the translator at the margins of the story. Rather, the narrative takes up the same issue through its treatment of transformation and a central symbol of authorship, the character Melusine. Like the cloth of *Emaré*, she comments on the text and its place in the genre of romance. However, whereas the cloth in *Emaré* evokes the text itself, Melusine functions as an author or translator, and in some moments even seems to wrest control of the text away from the “true” author. Like any author, Melusine wields immense creative power. She creates cities and castles out of thin air, and a king out of Raymound, born the youngest son of a poor forest noble. Their lineage is generated out of nothingness, from an Otherworld mother and an irrelevant father. Her many sons go on to become heroes of their own adventures, and their marvels extend endlessly: “The meruailles huge had in that ille there, / A thousand ther hau[e] fall, come, and unfold; / A thousand sayn, A thousand tymes told” (1578-1590). Melusine’s line and the stories generated thereof multiply beyond count, evoking the expansiveness of a genre.

Both Melusine and the text work at their introductions to establish themselves as authorities over the story. One such source of legitimacy is through a recitation of Christian doctrine. The prologue utilizes this familiar topos, calling on God, the ultimate

source of truth, to supervise the storytelling and in so doing confer legitimacy: “Off our sacred lord, sitting in trinite; / Now be he myn ayde in thys besinesse; / To hym only I trust in thys forth progresse” (prologue 66-68). Moreover, the author denounces pagan gods, drawing attention to the Christian belief structure he shares with his audience. He rejects pagan gods as objects of fantasy and feigning: “Suche fayned goddys noght is to cal on, / Thing Agayne our feith And but fantisie; / No help ne socour to cal thaim vppon” (prologue 57-59). The translator creates a distinction between truth and untruth, aligning himself firmly with truth and against fantasy. In underlining his firm adherence to religious truths, the author seeks by extension to claim credibility on other kinds of truths. Melusine, similarly, in introducing herself to Raymound falls back on a proclamation of piety: “Euery Article beleue I and hold / Of the holy feith catholike named” (*Partenay* 463-464). Her expression of belief gives way to a demand for belief of a different kind, that he “Firmely all beleue without doubte anye,” this time calling for trust in Melusine (472).

Melusine also uses her knowledge of more temporal truths to gain Raymound’s trust. She begins by revealing her knowledge of Raymound’s name: “Ther thys lady spake, ‘Raymound!’ ... When Raymounde knew sche hym ther namyng, / A litell began to muse that instance” (400, 402-403). Raymound himself can confirm that her knowledge is correct; he acts as a sure reference point verifying Melusine’s knowledge. The wider text also makes a claim to faithfully represent past, verifiable events. As has been noted, the author strenuously claims historical veracity, frequently referring to the text or a source as a “history” (*Partenay* Prologue 170, text 133, 1144, 5093, 5373, 5962, 5970, 6009, 6296, 6298). While Melusine uses Raymound’s own self-knowledge as a



reference point, the text refers to source materials as well as a named authority figure:

“This historie confermyd anthonye, / The erle of salz and of Barry also, / In a boke  
whych had of this castel hie” (177-179). While Anthony, Earl of Salisbury, may not be quite as incontrovertible an authority on the story of Melusine as Raymound is on his own name, the strategy is the same. Authorities serve as reference points, and their names as something concrete, recognizable, and immediately verifiable to establish credibility. Melusine continues establishing her position as an authority on the story by telling Raymound his own story thus far: “She declared hym ther all hys doynge” (422). Her mystic ability to recite deeds that she has not witnessed places her on a level with the author and with authors in general, who claim “To know in certain how fourged and wrought” are exploits from distant times and places (134).

Melusine next relates something even more unknowable: the future. She steps outside of the temporality of her tale to exert control of the story she herself is a part of; she can both accurately predict the future and influence the past. This ability reverses the usual possibility of knowing the past and influencing the future, giving Melusine a freedom from the timeline of events usually reserved to authors. The text itself frequently foreshadows the future, as if to assert control over the direction the text will go. Foreshadowing seems especially frequent and heavy-handed in *Partenay*, occurring several times before each major event; for example, Amerie’s death is foreshadowed at 114-116, 134, 140-141, and 210-219, leaving only a few lines between mentions. This heavy use of foreshadowing underscores the author’s unique power; while the reader and characters alike have limited knowledge because they must follow the flow of events, the author is free of such constraints.

Melusine, like the author, can foreshadow. She combines her knowledge of a past private conversation with a prediction: “Al that whiche your lord said youe varilye / By wordes myn fulfilyd shal be, / Truly and forsoth, yf so do wil ye / Ryght As I shal here vnto you rehers” (431-433). Melusine refers back to the earl’s vision shortly before his death, which led him to prophecy, “If a man gan sle hys lord souerayn, / As in thys hour, he shuld gretter lorde be” (210-211). Amerie’s prophetic insight may be partially explained by the nearness of his death; Melusine’s is more mysterious. However, Amerie lacks the power to change the course of his story or to fully understand the revelation. His foreknowledge resembles that of a reader encountering foreshadowing. Unlike the earl, a mere bystander in the events of his own death, Melusine claims to be able to shape this story. While Amerie can only read his fate, Melusine actively rewrites Raymound’s, explicitly “by wordes myn.” In rehearsing to Raymound the deeds he must perform and the words he must say, Melusine authors his dialogue and action, thereby determining the direction of his story.

Melusine’s authorial control over Raymound and, by extention, *Partenay* extends not only into the future, but also into the past. The death of Amerie, though it occurs before Melusine’s introduction into the story, falls under her sway. The true nature of the deed is obliterated from the text as Melusine works to obscure an act too taboo for representation. Heavy foreshadowing indicates that Raymound will kill Amerie, his foster father and patron. Raymound’s own lineage is minor; he is a younger son of a poor earl of the forest “Which of children had A huge noumbre gret,” meaning Raymound is impossibly far removed from a meager inheritance (37). Amerie, the earl’s far wealthier cousin, is moved to offer a great gift: he takes in the young and prospectless Raymound

and raises him with all of the advantages of wealth and of the court, assuring his father, “he shall be wel taught in curtesie and speche, / For suche doctrine schal hym lere and teche; / And for euermore ryche man shal hym make” (76-78). In spite of the more distant blood tie, Amerie becomes the boy’s patron, provider, and adoptive father, instantly whisking him from noble poverty to a life of courtly affluence. Thus, Raymound is bound to Amerie three times over: by blood, as Amerie is his cousin; by foster-parenthood; and by an incalculable debt. For Raymound to kill this man is worse than a patricide, a deed too taboo for the text to contain.

Although the text indicates pointedly that Raymound does indeed kill Amerie, the actual moment of this deed is completely expunged from the text under the direction of Melusine. Without obfuscation, the text states, “Raymound after thys, gayn wyl, hym gan sly,” allowing for no interpretive ambiguity about how Amerie meets his death (114). However, the clause “gayn wyl” indicates one of the textual problems that arises through the representation of this taboo act. Raymound, along with Melusine, is the mythical progenitor of the Lusignan family, a scion of which is the patron to the writer of the French source of *Partenay*, Coudrette (Hosington 408). As such, any depiction of Raymound coming into his position through the assassination of his father-figure and patron would present a delicate and dangerous challenge. The text negotiates this in part by asserting the deed clearly, “hym gan sly,” while softening Raymound’s culpability with implications of fate or providence, such that the murder occurs “gayn wyl,” against his will. Although the text ascribes the physical act to Raymound, it simultaneously attributes the ultimate cause to a force beyond Raymound. Amerie “to deth most incline / By fortune fals glotenous cruelte, / Which no-thing dredith ne doughteth to be,” the

falseness, greed, and cruelty here reflect not only murder in general, but the relationship between Raymound and Amerie and the betrayal and self-interest involved in such a killing (115-117). However, the text displaces these vices onto fortune, which itself is even further downplayed as not a tragic force but as something more neutral that “causith ofte meruelles for to come” (118). Nonetheless, shifting the blame from Raymound and onto an impersonal force does not prevent the text from contorting itself to avoid depicting the patricide, suggesting the problem of representation goes deeper.

In addition to the real-world ramifications, the scene presents problems characteristic of the genre while offering an uncharacteristic solution. Often, romance functions as a way to collectively think about taboos and to act out their consequences and ramifications in a fictional world. At times taboos too delicate to enact even in fiction receive their expression in the form of narrowly-averted acts, such as the tropes of near-miss incest and flight from incest. *Emaré* is one such example; Emaré’s father expresses his incestuous desire for her but is prevented from fulfilling it. In the case of *Partenay*, the text does not choose between fictionally enacting a taboo or promising and then averting one; it does both at the same time. After firmly stating that Raymound would kill Amerie, and in spite of afterwards referring to the incident as if he did, the text actually represents Amerie’s death as caused by a wild boar: “By myschef thys swyne smot hym feruentlye” (249). Far from slaying Amerie, Raymound acts to protect the life of his lord, urging him first to get to safety: “here vppon a tre wyghtly be clemmyng” (235). The boar meets Amerie first, “Thys swyne to the Erle forth faste ran anon,” killing him within a few lines, giving Raymound no time to interpose himself or kill the boar first (245). Raymound can neither be said to have killed the earl directly, nor through inaction.

Nonetheless, he falls to weeping and laments, “By my grete mysdede here hym slayn haue I;” the text reverts after the event to again referring to Amerie’s death as if Raymound is responsible (298). The text represents a story in which Raymound kills his foster-father, yet refuses to represent the act itself.

This contortion in the text is complicated by Melusine’s role in rewriting the story. The inconsistency is mirrored by Melusine’s effort to change the story; the mysterious lady instructs Raymound, “Of your said lord ne say ye no thyng / But that in the wode ye lost hym huntyng” (524-525). Indeed, Raymound, on returning to Poitier, claims that while hunting he lost his lord in the sense of becoming separated from him. On another level, the text itself seems to follow this command, claiming that Raymound lost his lord in the sense of separation by death while hunting, and represents “no thyng” beyond that. At Melusine’s instruction, Raymound convinces his own audience of his innocence, such that “the soule of the dede-doer accusyd nought / For neuer man ne had in hym beleue, lo! / That þe dede was by hym done and wrought,” and indeed even the text refuses to accuse him directly by representing the patricide (611-613). Although Melusine exists within the story, the lie that she instructs Raymound to tell seems to work its way back retroactively to the episode of Amerie’s death and change the text itself. The deed becomes obscured from the text just as Melusine wishes for it to be obscured within the text. Melusine works even as the author does to change her source material to better suit her purposes, and like the author changes the story not through direct action, but by putting different words in the mouths of other characters. On one level, the author’s decision to change the death of Amerie can be attributed to Melusine, whose working the reader can see far more visibly.

Changing reality in the text is a great and terrible power, and the mutability of the text has some serious implications for the responsibilities of authorship. Each retelling, rewriting, and translation entails change, creating the tension at the heart of the translator's anxiety that "Perhaps by lachesse, or by necligence, / Our-sight myght cause obliuion" (6574-6575). Oblivion is the dark side of alteration, wherein some element of the source is expunged to make room for something new, or simply lost in the next version. It can leave a hole in the story, as in the case of Raymound's absent patricide. Yet, alteration is a necessary part of the process, whether in writing a new version from source materials or translating into a new language; both translating and writing are acts of transformation. This sits uneasily with the author's dedication to the ideal of unchanging truth, "Requiring that lord whych is Almightye / That of hys highnesse he be my trew gide, / The weyes of trouth me vn-to prouide" (61-63). One way to rectify this tension is to generate a superfluity of truths, to represent contradictions or redundancy so that "oblivion" is avoided at the cost of brevity and clarity. This strategy also hedges the author's bets regarding truth, which must no doubt be contained in the text somewhere, albeit alongside contradictions. Amerie's death also serves as an example of this; while the moment of his murder is expunged from the text, the remaining discussion of the patricide means that two versions exist side by side. In the literal version, a boar kills Amerie; simultaneously, in the implied version, Raymound kills him. This over-saturation of narrative meanings stems from the fear that transformation is dangerous and results in the loss of some original truth from the text.

Not only can transformation be a potential violence committed against the text, but it also accompanies violence within the text. Amerie's death is one example, when a

boar stands in for Raymound; later on, similar imagery recurs when one of Raymound's sons kills another. Gaffrey, the kin-killing son, is identified by his great tooth. While the single enlarged tooth, "pasing gret and square," does not perfectly replicate anything found in nature, nonetheless it calls to mind the tusks of the boar that killed Amerie (1249). The boar, like Gaffrey, is identified most vividly by its teeth. When the boar first appears, the two physical features emphasized are its great size and its tusks: "Then afor them saw ny to them comyng / An huge bore of meruelous wreth beyng, / With tuskes tho whettyng ful strongly" (230-232). The reference to the tusks occurs again near the end of the encounter, directly linked to Amerie's death: "There he moste of horse fal to hys tuskes bold" (250). Gaffrey's square tooth and the boar's tusks are different enough, however, that the connection does not become apparent until a moment of transformation.

In a moment of rage paralleling the wrath of the charging boar, Gaffrey seems to transform into something capable of mindless destruction. Upon learning that his brother Fromont has become a monk, Gaffrey changes: "Off malice And wreth had in his body / he uomed And swatte, A swine resembling" (3214-3215). In the moment of his outrage, Gaffrey is transformed by his own rage into a boar, and this makes him capable of breaking another taboo: fratricide, plus the murder of a hundred defenseless monks, an act that combines the massacre of unarmed innocents with sacrilege. The sense of temporary transformation is confirmed when, after barring the doors and burning down the abbey containing his brother and the monks, Gaffrey returns to himself: "When better remembred hys diffaute, lo! / With shill voce cried þat time hautaynly, / 'Alas, caitife!' saide, 'don haste folily'" (3316-3318). Effectively, he becomes again a human with human restraints and taboos. Furthermore, the close parallels between this episode and

Amerie's death suggest that, in addition to seeing the text as presenting two separate overlaid versions of the episode of Amerie's death, another reading is that the boar and Raymound are dual images of each other: perhaps not a full transformation, but a transposition of Raymound's taboo action onto another, more animal and wrathful version of himself that can kill with impunity.

In both the deaths of Amerie and Fromont, the boar is not merely the agent of destruction, but the image of it. The focal point of the boar image is the fearsome teeth, both the tusks of the animal and the tooth of Gaffrey. According to the MED, secondary definitions for "toth" (tooth) are "Appetite, corporeal desire; also consumption," followed by "Rapacity, aggression, strife; rapacious appetite." The sense of aggression recalls the wrath of the boar as well as the rage that transforms Gaffrey and causes him to grit his teeth: "Then sore he grint And strayned his teeth apace" (3276). Beyond that, these underlying connotations underline the destructiveness of the transformation. Just as translation, the transformation of the text, risks oblivion of meaning and violence to the text, the boar embodies another kind of oblivion within the text. The transformed Gaffrey has a seemingly limitless appetite for destruction, and "To all ilnesse do lust had and talent" (3298). Appropriately, he employs another agent of transformation, destruction, and consumption to satiate this appetite. Gaffrey sets a fire that engulfs the abbey in its entirety, and "All that ther within wasted to huge grame" (3310). The appetite of the tooth and, in turn, of the fire is one that devours and leaves behind only ruin and waste: buildings transform into a scorched stain on the landscape and people into disfigured bodies.



The boar represents a destructive, consuming transformation that leads to oblivion, echoing the translator's concerns about a translation that does violence to the text. However, this destructive transformation is not the only kind represented in the text. Far more common is an opposite form of transformation: addition. Far from the reckless destruction that consumes Fromont and the other monks, this kind of transformation rejects even judicious pruning, preferring instead to multiply characters, episodes, and events. The adventures of Melusine's sons follow this model. While it is fairly common for a romance to begin with the story of a woman and then relate the adventures of her son, *Partenay* multiplies this out over a shifting number of sons. The eldest and the third sons, Urien and Guy, go adventuring in Cyprus; when they save the Christian inhabitants from Saracen invaders, Urien marries the heiress of Cyprus, Ermyne, whose father is dead and who lacks siblings (1506). The text produces a duplicate of Ermyne for Guy in the person of Floury, heir to Armenia, also fatherless and brotherless and a cousin of Ermyne (1618). The text multiplies the entire episode when the fourth and fifth sons, Anthony and Raynold, set off for Luxemburg and defend another heiress from attackers (1691-1708). No sooner does Anthony marry Cristian, the orphaned heiress of the dukedom, than a letter arrives to introduce the orphaned heiress of Brehayne, a suitable match for Raynold (1974). The story multiplies out from Melusine, spinning off new adventures and wives for each of her sons.

Even the number of sons seems to multiply. Melusine gives birth to her seventh son and names him Ffromont: "The seffe child Ffromont that time callyd was" (1261). Later, Melusine goes on to "bare wurthy children to...On called Fromont, Another Thierry" (2548, 2550). Possibly she names two of her sons Fromont, or perhaps one is a

duplicate. The first Fromont is not mentioned again, but with his “stature of persone hie, gret, and long, / Inly wel formed, pulcricous of face, / Sage, subtile, wel taught, myghty and stronge,” he seems quite different from the second Fromont, who renounces the adventuring lifestyle to become a monk (1262-64). Unlike all of his brothers, the second Fromont wishes to pursue a contemplative life, a choice frowned upon by his father Raymound, who blusters, ““So god be pleased, monke shall ye noght be. / Another ordre to you yiff I shall, / A knyght will you mak of full hye degre / As your brethren ben named ryght roiall”” (2570-73). In reality, however, Fromont represents “another order,” both literally in joining an order of monks, but also by presenting an alternative to the militancy of Raymound’s other sons. More specifically, he is an alternate Fromont; when the narrator lists what each son of Melusine goes on to do near the end of the romance, he only lists the latter Fromont, whom Gaffrey kills (5307-46). The text generates two versions of Fromont, one to fulfill the expectations of Raymound and another to take the cloth.

The creation of duplicate siblings also extends back a generation. Melusine is one of a set of triplets: three fair daughters born in the same year (4535). Their father had agreed not to enquire after his wife, Presine, while she lay in childbirth; when he broke his pledge, she left, splitting the marriage forever: “Anon ther fro hym I uanished me” (4539). Each daughter received a variation of the mother’s curse. Melusine must prohibit her husband from seeing her on Saturdays (1022). Melior must stay in an Armenian castle and grant a wish to the man who can watch a sparrow-hawk for three days, unless that wish be her body (4551-4611). Palatine must guard her father’s treasure high in the mountains “Till som approche and come, of lineage our” (4630). Although each curse is

different, all are variations on the theme of seclusion from non-related males, and each involves guarding something from men. The curses each impose a limit on male sexual desire, each more stringent than the last. For Melusine, her husband's desire must be curtailed only once a week, when he may not ask after her. Melior may not be asked for ever, and Palatine cannot even be approached by a non-related male. The sisters are variations on each other, and while *Partenay* is primarily concerned with Melusine and her sons, their stories and their mother's are told as well, resulting in variations on the curse tale at the center of *Partenay*.

Moreover, each variation is in turn retold, mirroring the way that romances themselves are propagated. *Partenay* contains itself many times over, much as the cloth in *Emaré* contains other romances. The story of Melusine's mother, Presine, and how she came to curse her daughters is inscribed in a tablet (4522). The text of this tablet forms a part, albeit a brief one, of the text of *Partenay*, one romance told in its entirety within another. Then, Gaffrey relates the story of the tablet to his father, providing an oral counterpoint to the textual version inscribed in the tablet (5029-40). Melior provides another retelling, this time adding on the tale of Melusine and Raymound (5575-5614). Finally, a clerk provides the most exhaustive retelling of the story, such that "All trouth and verite by hym was vnfold / Of that I haue told, declared, and sayd" (5990-91). The story within the story begins as an inscribed text, invulnerable to change, yet with each retelling it expands in both details and truths rather than becoming more corrupted. The actual outcome of various successive retellings of the text, each characterized by additions, stands in sharp contrast to the translator's anxiety about oblivion of meaning and violent marring of the text. Additions to the story within *Partenay*, as well as

generation of new siblings with variations on the same adventure, constitute a nonthreatening kind of change.

Generating alternate, even redundant characters is a form of transformation at stark odds with Gaffrey's transformation, which results in the death of one of his brothers. Fittingly, Gaffrey never marries; although not held to be as threatening as his brother Horrible, Gaffrey is too closely aligned with destructive change to be the agent of production. However, there exists another type of change between nonthreatening addition and senseless destruction. Changing one thing into another, transformation in its truest sense, is a more delicate topic, one more tied up with the practice of translation and with the person of Melusine herself.

Although often the agent of creation, Melusine also comes to represent another form of change, a benign if startling transformation from one thing to another. Melusine herself transforms every Saturday so that she becomes a serpent from the waist down, a hybrid creature resembling the dragons that traditional romance heroes fight. However, Melusine's physical monstrosity is downplayed. Instead, greater moral outrage is directed at how Raymound discovers her secret. Raymound's brother convinces him to uncover his wife's secret, so he approaches the iron door he knows her to be behind "Then drawing his swerd the scaberge fro, / The poynt gayn the dore put he ther-vnto" (2790-91). Rather than Melusine's transformation inflicting violence, as dragons and monsters typically do, she is the victim of a violent act expressed through heavy rape imagery. Raymound draws his sword and forces it into the door: "the yren dore persed at the laste" (2739). The sword's role as both a weapon and a phallic symbol merge in this moment of violent, nonconsensual penetration. The forced entry is a violation not only of

Raymound's oath, but also of Melusine's inner sanctum, of her privacy, and of her expressed will.

Next, Raymound subjects his wife to a voyeuristic male gaze. The hole he has created serves a double function, firstly as an image of violent penetration and secondly as the site of voyeurism: "At the perced hole in beheld with eye / To know what ther was besied faste ay" (2796-97). Although Melusine later forbears from leaving Raymound "For he discouered noght (but kepe it trew) / The dede vnto no person that instaunce," Raymound is not truly alone in gazing through the hole (2931-32). Melusine cannot be contained by the text, and neither can this scene. The audience also shares in Raymound's voyeuristic gaze as the text offers a description of Melusine that is far more revealing and sexual than anything presented previously:

At the hole beheld, perceyuing full welle  
Melusine, hou she bathed euerydell,  
Unto hir nauell shewing ther full white,  
like As is the snow A faire branche vppon,  
The body welle made, frike in ioly plite,  
The visage pure, fresh, clenly hir person,  
To properly speke off hir faccion,  
Neuer non fairer ne more reuerent;  
But A taill had beneth of serpent! (2799-2807).

That Melusine is bathing heightens the violation; Raymound's gaze makes her non-sexual and private nakedness the object of nonconsensual, sexualizing scrutiny. The hole allows for Raymound to view Melusine but does not permit her to gaze back, reflecting the way that the text itself allows the reader to view Melusine while hiding the reader from her searching gaze. The text fragments her, fixing its gaze on parts at the expense of the whole. The eyes of both Raymound and the reader move up and down her body, beginning at the navel, moving up to her face, and finally descending below the waist.

The entire scene compounds the violation of the symbolic penetration, stripping Melusine down and exposing her naked body not only to Raymound, but also to the reader.

This scene presents a remarkable reversal of Melusine's earlier power. Her sexualized description departs dramatically from earlier treatment of her; when she is first introduced, the text also filters its description through Raymound's gaze, but the power dynamic privileges Melusine. In marked contrast to the episode in the bath, she sees Raymound before he sees her. She is one of "Thre fair laydes of gret seignorie. / In hys forth-passyng saw non of thaim all" (339-340). Her beauty is acknowledged but overshadowed by her status, expressed as "seignorie," which the MED defines as "lordship, power, authority, control." Raymound does not see her until she has already seized the reins of his horse; again her beauty is expressed, but reverentially, and alongside her control: "But when perceyued the humayn bodye / Of thys fair lady hym so to restrayne, / In whom gret beute was preynted freshlye" (380-382). The advantage conferred by an unreturned gaze belongs to Melusine here, and the language used to describe her beauty reflects her greater power. Rather than fragmenting her body into parts, Raymound addresses her as "Soueran layde of gret beute hye" (387). Her beauty becomes a means of expressing her power and nobility rather than a source of objectification. The reverential tone used to describe Melusine at her introduction and the more restrained description of her beauty render the later scene of her violation all the more shocking.

Melusine's violation also represents a reversal of another kind. This romance deals again and again with knowledge, and with kinds of knowledge, which are often

difficult to differentiate. Knowledge is typically treated as a worthy goal, even as the goal of the genre of romance:

Who wyl know and enquire in what maner wyse,  
By se and land meruelous auentures  
Which came unto sondry creatures,  
For to conne it is an excellent thyng,  
And cause of many mannys preferring (Prologue 101-105).

Romance is configured as a source of knowledge that is both enjoyable and valuable, a cause of “preferring.” Melusine has supernatural knowledge of what was, what is, and what will be, in much the same way as the narrator of the text: both relate past events and foreshadow the future from an omniscient point of view. Conversely, the other characters’ ignorance of her history and lineage makes some uneasy, such as the earl who succeeds Amerie, who warns Raymound not to marry a woman he knows so little about: “What is that lady which that ye shal take? Warde you And beware ye tAke [sic] noght amis, / knowith whens she is and of wat linage” (833-835). Knowledge in this way is a kind of power, and part of Melusine’s matriarchal sway over the story comes from the power imbalance. She knows far more about other characters than they know about her, and her knowledge allows her to control events and instruct Raymound. However, both the site of knowledge and the text’s moral assessment of it are reversed at the scene of Melusine’s exposure.

The problem of Melusine’s serpent tail is not her monstrosity, but Raymound’s decision to spy on her. Interestingly, although Melusine resembles one of the archetypical adversaries of romance, the dragon, the text’s reproach falls on Raymound. He immediately regrets his action and attempts to undo it: “But to Ende the hole were stopped & faste made... That by it myght noght man perceiue no-thyng” (2817, 2820).

However, while Raymound can repair the hole and fervently hope that no one else sees the tail, he cannot unsee his wife nor take back the knowledge of the audience, who has learned his wife's secret alongside him. Although the prologue suggests that knowledge is valuable no matter "what maner wyse" it is acquired, the story does not bear this out (Prologue 101). The knowledge that Raymound seeks about Melusine involves a violation of his wife's privacy, of Raymound's own word, and of the inner sanctum of her chambers. As a result, the knowledge Raymound gains is symbolically equivalent to a rape. The power Melusine enjoys through her knowledge is forcibly and dishonestly seized, a process of learning markedly distinct from that celebrated in the prologue. Because Melusine is not only herself, but also stands in for the author, her violation also represents a violation of the authorial process, wherein the audience's scrutiny is turned to an inappropriate object: the author rather than the story.

Raymound's oath-breaking seems to contradict the invitation to scrutiny in the prologue and epilogue. At the conclusion of his work, the translator suggests, "Both bokes displaide to vision, / Verefie I wold the declaracion, / That on by other knowen well shold be, / Resembling well All o ssoule dite" (6591-94). While this invitation to compare his source to his translation line by line may seem bold, this show of confidence masks insecurity about the process of translation. The translator does not expect a reader to check his work against a source but simply assures the reader of what they would find if, hypothetically, they did check line by line. In the same way, Melusine tells Raymound what he would find if he sought her on a Saturday, although she forbids him from doing so:

Als I schall you swere For trouth uerilie,  
To non ille place go ne will certaynlie,



But alwais to labour that iournay,  
Puttyng my hole hert, strength, mynde, and thought (.) ay  
To your honour, hawse, and encrese also;  
Neuer shal ye se me forsworn no day. (494-499).

Ultimately, both of these accounts act not as an invitation to scrutiny, but rather to an assurance that scrutiny is not necessary. Moreover, Melusine emphasizes many of the values present in the translator's description of his work. Like the narrator, she promises to do no harm, to go "to non ille place," just as the narrator promises to do no harm to the text, "Preseruing, I trust, mater and sentence / Vnwemmed, vnhurt, for any excesse" (6568-69). Melusine swears and swears again, dedicating herself to truth and implying faithfulness to her husband much as the translator vows faithfulness to his sources. Raymound is in a sense Melusine's source material, as she shifts his prospects to create a story from a landless youth, then creates sons through him who go on to have adventures of their own. She also promises labor, as the narrator does as part of a modesty topos: "Mi labor wil don After my simplenesse" (Prologue 71). Melusine's and the narrator's descriptions of what closer scrutiny would reveal are closely linked, and in both cases such scrutiny would be violating.

The narrator's apparent invitation to compare his work against the source should not be taken literally. Even more than the practical difficulties, which would require one to read both French and English and to have access to the French source text, the outcome of Melusine's tale firmly demonstrates the problems of such scrutiny. She describes to Raymound what she will do on Saturdays, pledges her word, and expects Raymound to keep his word in turn. In this regard, Raymound comes to resemble a reader. He must accept Melusine's greater knowledge and her discretion: Melusine may know all about the story while simultaneously retaining her own mystery and

detachment. Should he peer where he ought not, not only will he commit a moral wrong by violating his word and his wife, but also “ye shall me lese, be therof certane...After that, ye and al your hoires playn / Shal begin to fall, and thaim-selfe distayn / Off landes, honoures, and heritages;” all that Melusine is and all that she has created will evaporate, like the illusions of storytelling (506, 508-510). For all that the text calls itself a history, the story relies on the suspension of disbelief and a willing buy-in, which extends to reading generously and allowing the translator and author both a degree of mystery.

However, this appeal for authorial discretion is not the final word on the transformative role of writing and translating. A final episode draws together the destructive, consuming transformation of the boar and the benign but secretive transformation of Melusine. This episode, concerning Melusine’s sister Palestine, marks a unification of tooth and serpent imagery alongside a sharp change in tone. No longer asking the reader to allow authorial discretion, the text shows that the author can in fact insist on it and reasserts authorial power after the anxiety surrounding prior discussions of translation and transformation. Palestine resides in a castle on a mountain in Aragon, where she guards her father’s treasure and is guarded in turn by “many A cruell serpent,” recalling the snake tail of Melusine (5726). Reference to serpents abounds; the way up the mountain is “Full of serpentes, inly perilous” (5802). At the top of the mountain lurks another serpent-like monster, although this one seemingly closer to a dragon than a snake: “A monstre hyduous...Aboue all other wormes most perilous” (5770, 5772). Although this last creature is referred to as the more ambiguous “monstre” throughout the episode, the early comparison to other “wormes,” with that term’s strong associations with serpents and dragons, suggests an image of a dragon-like monster (5770, 5793,

5816, 5913, 5920, 5926). Moreover, the monster is female, again recalling Melusine (5922). The insistence on a trail of snakes leading up to a female “worme” strongly suggests the serpent tail of the romance’s focal character, Melusine, a connection reinforced by the strange facial configuration of the dragon.

The sons of Melusine all have unusual features revealing their otherworldly parentage. For the most part, these features are confined to strange facial configurations. Urien, the firstborn, “was of ful gret renone; But hys uisage was strange to uision,” short and broad with one red eye and one gray, in addition to a huge mouth and nostrils (1159-60). Description of the second son, Oede, also focuses on his face, “As shynyng fire his uisage semyng be, / With wonder rednesse so resplendising” (1195-96). The third son, Guy, is the fairest ever seen, “Sauyng þat on ey had he more basly / Then þat other” (1216-17). Each description includes a reference to one or more odd facial feature: Antony is born with a scar on his face; Raynold with a single eye set high on his face; Gaffrey with his great tooth; the first Ffromont has a blemish on his nose like a wolf’s rough skin; Horrible, whom even Melusine seems to fear, has three eyes; while the second Fromont and Tierry, as well as a final son named Raymound introduced near the end, lack physical descriptions (1228-29, 1240-41, 1247-49, 1265-67, 1269). Each physical description comes with one idiosyncratic facial feature or more that marks each son as related to Melusine. The worm guarding Palestine receives similar treatment. In addition to descriptions of its great size and hanging paunch, the monster sports an unusual face:

But on ere hath noght this monstrous gest,  
Ne nostrelles non appering in hed.  
Thys wonderfull and meruelous best  
Ne but on ey hath middes the forehed

Which thre fote ny hath, wat in lenght & bred. (5776-80).

With one ear (which it breathes through), no nostrils, and a single, massive eye in the middle of its forehead, the monster recollects the sons of Melusine, whose descriptions often focus on eye placement and other idiosyncratic facial features. The monster's strange face, along with its description as a worm, creates a strong connection to Melusine; however, the creature also shares several important links with the competing agent of change, consumption.

A run of imagery concerning mouths, teeth, throats, and bellies leads up to the moment in which the monster devours its challenger. The intrepid knight first encounters "An horrible serpent," not the mighty worm but one of the lesser serpents, intent on eating him: "Trowyng hym deuour that houred instaunce, / With a yanyng throte gain hym gan Auaunce" (5849, 5851-52). The reference to devouring and a yawning throat are continued in the fight; the knight attacks the same gaping throat, "With o soule stroke the necke cute ato swiftly" (5857). While still fairly inconspicuous in this first encounter, reference to eating and organs of eating grow more frequent and heavy-handed in the next encounter. After being attacked by a bear, the knight swings his sword at its snout, "The beres gret groin tho smote he vppon," an action that, for further emphasis, literally stops the animal's biting: "Tho durst he noght charge As of his bityng" (5875, 5879). The repeated reference to the animal's mouth continues with a pun: "Natheles tho was heuily chermat" (5882). The MED glosses "chermat" as "downcast," noting the word is only found in this sentence. However, the word also has a more literal definition. "Cher" comes from Old French "chiere, chere" and refers to "the human face," while "mat," also from Old French, can mean "helpless, powerless; overcome, defeated" or else

“exhausted, worn out.” Literally, the bear is “face-fallen” or “chap-fallen” at having its snout cut off. This face pun makes the emphasis on mouth and throat imagery unmistakable, even before the knight finishes off the bear with final strokes “Thorough hys throte” and “Thorough belay” (5898, 5904). The heavy emphasis on eating imagery both connects this episode to the teeth of Gaffrey and the boar, and foreshadows the final encounter with the worm.

Eating imagery reaches its zenith with the monster, connecting it to forces of consumptive change. The monster is described not only in terms of its strange face, but also its cavernous belly, “hys monstre belay As pipe large and gret,” a feature that suggests the beast’s great appetite (5926). Moreover, the monster fights with its teeth: “Thys monstre with teeth the swerd ther taking, / In moitees to Forthwith it breking” (5935-36). Ultimately, the eating imagery foreshadows the knight’s demise when “With A yanyng throte thys knight gan manace, / All at a morsell swolewed knight surely” (5941-42). The imagery of eating and eating organs has been made so explicit in the preceding fights acts not only to foreshadow this final moment, but also to underline the significance of mouths and devouring. These themes connect the episode to the thread of tooth and consumption imagery running throughout the rest of the romance, including the boar that kills Amerie and Gaffrey, with his great tooth and his role in burning down the abbey. Up until this episode, these forces stand in opposition to Melusine, who combines creative power with her ability to give birth to sons and to create a name for Raymund with a benign transformative element in which she becomes part serpent in the privacy of her chamber. These two strains of imagery, teeth and serpents, were formerly distinct, but

coexist in the dragon-like monster at the conclusion of the tale, suggesting that creative and benign transformation can coexist with destruction.

In contrast with the tragic-epic tone that characterizes most of the romance, the final episode handles destruction far more playfully. The death of the knight toys with reader expectations, both denying generic norms while fulfilling foreshadowing. Heavy irony and foreshadowing create a joke at the expense of both the reader and the genre. Not only are knights generally expected to slay their adversaries, but the knight in this adventure holds special generic significance; he comes from “the hy court of noble king Arthure” and “Off Tristram-is line” (5748, 5750). Furthering the irony, his famous lineage is actually the cause of his failure. While an excellent lineage, his is not the right one; only a relative of Palestine’s can scale the mountain (5715). After setting up this requirement, the text draws attention to its arbitrary nature, not only by setting it against an even more famous lineage with reference to Tristram, but also by emphasizing that only the stipulations of the curse and not the knight’s personal qualities dictate the outcome: “Forsoth that tresour conquerd then had he, / So of that linage aboue-said had be” (6010-11). The humor in the scene is compounded by the ignominiousness of the knight’s death, when “Thys knight swolewed, in throte noght pering / More then doth A pastay in ouen truly!” (5944-45). The indignity not only of defeat, but of being swallowed whole like a pastry creates a joke at the expense of generic norms and the expectations of the audience, albeit one softened by the heavy foreshadowing as well as the namelessness of the knight in question, who is a minor character in spite of his impressive ancestry.

The levity of this episode contrasts sharply with the tragedy and taboos of the other episodes associated with teeth and destruction, namely Raymound's patricide of Amerie and Gaffrey's fratricide of Fromont. The humor and irony emphasize the fictionality of the episode, thereby downplaying the severity of the destruction depicted. Moreover, the heavy foreshadowing and the subversion of expectations mark an assertion of authorial power in contrast to the apologies of the translator in the prologue and the ambivalence implied in portraying Melusine, an authorial character, as a tragic figure with a monstrous if benign form. However, the romance goes beyond undermining the seriousness of death in romance to suggest that destruction can go hand in hand with positive transformative change.

After the death of the unnamed knight, ironic death continues with a more substantive character. Gaffrey is of the correct lineage, yet is prevented from seeking a fight with the monster for another reason. After hearing of the monster and sending for Tierry to act as regent, Gaffrey is on the brink of departing, "Sayng he moste go withoute any reste...But when that he shold haue taken hys way, / Gret siknesse hym toke and age gan repair" (6054, 6056-57). Gaffrey's old age catches up with him in an instant and the restlessness characteristic of adventuring knights suddenly reverts to bed rest and death. This reminder of Gaffrey's mortality is shocking in a genre peopled by young knights and maidens; young male protagonists seldom seem to grow old, unless it occurs after the action of the romance. Unlike the knight eaten by the monster, however, Gaffrey dies not a violent death, but a natural one, reconfiguring destruction as a natural process. While destruction is still all-consuming, and "deth sparith noght tho feble ne stronge," Gaffrey's death represents a less threatening and more measured side of this force (6066).

The reminder of mortality involved in Gaffrey's death also involves both humor and hope. Gaffrey's sudden old age and death is not only ironically anticlimactic, but also makes way for Thierry, the younger son: "Gaffray ther hym made hys enheritour...So he regned there, & in pertenay; / Regned and gouerned pusantly" (6120, 6124-25). Creation and destruction, long separated in the romance between opposing forces, come together in the end as part of an ongoing process of change. Loss and gain are mingled both in Thierry and in his legacy:

But after thys by hys mariage,  
geuyng to on here, to Anoder there,  
So Alienyng part of hys heritage.  
yut noght-with-standyng god of hys power  
Causith the line regne yut without danger (6126-30).

Unlike the devastation of the maddened boar or all-consuming fire, loss here becomes something gradual and not absolute. The partition of Raymound's old lands, since inherited by Thierry, comes about not through destruction in the form of conquest or pillage, but rather through marriage and gifts of land. Furthermore, this loss of lands is not configured as unqualified destruction, but rather exists alongside an acknowledgment of the continued safety of the family.

The fictional world of *Partenay* allows the collective authors and translators of the text to explore the implications of change as they relate to authorship. Given a concern with adhering to "The weyes of trouth" and with a growing perception of romance as quasi-historical in the fourteenth century, the changes that occur in translation and adaptation present a problem for authors (Prologue 63, Hosington 418). This concern touches not only the English translator responsible for the present version, but for all of his predecessors involved in the act of collectively writing *Partenay* by translating or



adapting earlier versions, and for medieval authors in general. The body of the text explores a number of types of change that relate to authorship, including the loss of meaning, or “obliuion,” represented by the destructive forces of the boar and Gaffrey’s fratricide (*Partenay* text 6575). The person of Melusine represents a more positive form of transformation, creative power married to judicious change. Melusine constitutes an alternate form of change, one that is not negative but rather misunderstood. She is powerful yet vulnerable, monstrous yet benign, and the text is emphatic in siding with Melusine’s right to hide the magical nature that underpins her powers. Although the text’s discussion of change is often ambivalent, the firmness with which it protects Melusine’s own transformation sets the foundation for the final reassertion of authorial control.

In the final episode, the author reclaims power. While the text asks for sympathy for Melusine, it nevertheless allows her to be violated so as to invite judgment of her violator. In the final episode, the author enforces the discretion he previously only asked for. Heavy, ironic foreshadowing asserts the author’s control over events, and the sudden deaths of first a minor character and then a major one are dramatic reversals that subvert both audience expectations and generic norms. Change is at its most shocking here, shifting the tone of the piece as well as the fortunes of a major character. However, these sudden deaths are softened by humor and an acknowledgement that destruction need not be absolute, but can exist alongside such creative forces as marriage and inheritance. At the end, the destructive and creative potentials of change are merged. While devouring, destructive change previously seemed to leave nothing behind, yet the romance continues. Amerie’s story gives way to Raymound’s, and Gaffrey rebuilds the abbey he

burned, this time with more monks than before (*Partenay* 5279-82). Although the more hopeful treatment of transformation in the final episode may not entirely expunge the anxiety explored throughout text, the text ultimately entrusts to authorial discretion the responsibility of managing changes to the text.

### Conclusion: Self-Consciousness

Although romances are often criticized as lacking self-consciousness and originality, a number of Middle English romances explore issues of their own genre. From the remove of a few centuries, romance seems innocuous in its conservatism, always resolving into decisive, norm-affirming conclusions. However, to people of the Middle Ages and shortly after, romances seemed threatening. The genre depicts taboo acts of incestuous desire, violence against innocents, and unjust rule, and medieval critics worried that these acts would spill over into real life, normative endings notwithstanding. Containing the taboos that drive the plot within the fictive space created by romance requires confidence that readers or listeners will arrive at an interpretation within certain bounds, one that recognizes the damage done by unsanctioned lust or violence and accommodates the norm-reaffirming ending. *Emaré* asserts that arriving at sanctioned interpretations is inevitable because the negative consequences of misreadings are self-evident. Even when *Emaré*'s mother-in-law effectively changes the text by forging letters to force a misreading, the text offers other sources, including the letter-writers themselves and oral and written versions in *Segramour* and the cloth. This romance is the most optimistic and the most firm in resolving interpretive problems with the same emphasis the genre characteristically uses to resolve social problems.

While *Emaré* treats the final moment of reinterpretation fairly briefly, *Sir Tryamour* expands on the act of reinterpretation to show which signifiers are reliable and which subject to deceptive alteration. Sir Marrok, the treacherous steward, deceives both Margaret and her husband, who does not seek any outside confirmation of his words. The romance criticizes him in particular for failing to talk to his wife; absent words can be as

deceptive as untruthful ones. However, the king is led to a correct interpretation by the hound Trewelove, who functions like a romance to reenact events and point to symbols for his audience. The bodies of Sir Marrok and Sir Roger facilitate correct interpretation where words misled, upholding symbols as unfalsifiable signifiers and requiring readers to arrive at the end of a plot sequence before reaching a correct interpretation. While this romance maintains much of the optimism of *Emaré*, albeit with greater anxiety concerning words as easily falsified, *Undo Your Door* reverses the entire model, bringing about events that characters speak about even when they intend to lie. This romance also uses corpses as symbols, but falsifies them by mutilating the face and changing the clothing on the body of the steward. Even the ending lacks the characteristic emphasis of romance, leaving hanging the princess's horror and confusion about the deception played on her. *Undo Your Door* reopens many of the problems explored by the previous romances, but all three treat changes to a text as acts of violence and deceit, representing them as acts that break taboos, like mutilating a corpse, or simply a form of lying, like changing letters.

The *Romans of Partenay* challenges this assumption. The English translator expresses many of the same anxieties, vowing to do no violence to the text and translating as closely as possible to avoid unnecessary changes or loss of meaning. However, the text explores change more broadly, showing that while change can bring "obluiion," it can also be creative or transformative, leading to new meanings and new potentials. Melusine acts like an author within the text, giving birth to new romance heroes and creating castles out of nothing. Her more threatening change is her weekly transformation into a half-serpent, but the text treats her sympathetically and indicts

Raymound for his violation of her privacy. The text allows Melusine discretion to transform in private, and although the change to her body seems frightening, she remains benevolent. *Partenay* argues in the end that such change is not inherently violent or destructive, but rather a part of creation and transformation, one that ought to be left to authorial discretion.

While this text focuses less on readership and interpretation than the others, its discussion of authorship nonetheless has implications for readers. In the relationship between audience and author, the author enjoys a privileged position. The author is outside of the flow of the narrative, able to control events and know the ending. By contrast, the reader must follow the sequence of events, gaining knowledge incrementally. To read a text is to essentially agree to this author-reader relationship. Prying too closely into the authorial process to witness the transformation in action constitutes a violation of that relationship and an act of violence otherwise absent from the authorial process. In effect, *Partenay* shifts the act of violence expressed in *Emaré*, *Sir Tryamour*, and *Undo Your Door* as an authorial act, that of changing the text, to the reader when he or she pries into an authorial process that fundamentally involves change. Although the ending is somewhat abrupt, it is set up by the climactic moment of Melusine's violation. The final episode seizes back the power taken by Raymound when he spies on his wife. The normative ending reasserted by *Partenay* is not one of normalized social mores or sanctioned interpretations, but simply of trust in the authorial process.

Often seen today as conservative and conventional, romances in fact experienced considerable opprobrium in the past for their treatment of sensitive, taboo themes. Rather

than functioning either as passive reiterations of the status quo or mindless depictions of debauchery, however, romances participate in the discussion of their genre. The same model they use to explore social questions, that of a plot driven by deviations from the accepted norm resolved into a norm-affirming conclusion, also functions to explore questions of the genre. While they focus on different parts of the processes of writing and reading and at times come to different conclusions, these romances are not only sources of entertainment, but also commentators on their own genre.

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